Flip of a Coin

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HELLO!

Well, everyone, this is it. It is with great pleasure we present to you this first issue of FLIP OF A COIN, a zine dedicated to the characters portrayed by Harrison Ford. We hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoy bringing it to you.

First of all, a few thanks are in order. We received material from many old friends without whom FLIP would not be. In putting together this issue, we have also made many new friends and we certainly hope this trend continues with all future issues. We want to thank everyone for your contributions and especially your encouragement.

About future issues... We would like to publish FLIP quarterly, if possible, but that will be up to the contributors. We want to keep each issue about the size of this one--around a hundred pages; that seems to be a size that will be fairly easy to handle. As long as we receive quality material, and continue to receive the support shown for this issue, that goal should be fairly easy to meet (we think).

We intended to have a biography section but space limitations precluded that feature. We enjoy learning about our friends, what their other interests are, etc., and we thought our readers would be interested also. So, we would like each contributor, if you wish, to enclose a short bio of yourself, which we will include in all future issues in which your material is printed. For those of you who have already sent in bios with the intention that they be included in this issue, we apologize. We simply ran out of space.

As far as guidelines for writings and artwork are concerned, at the present time, we will keep them fairly simple. As time goes on, we may have to expand the requirements. Stories should be typed, double spaced, and preferably grammatically correct. We would prefer not to have continued stories; i.e., the whole story should be contained in one issue. (Let's just let George Lucas be the one to keep everyone in suspense. That's enough!) And the story must be in character. Oh, yeah, one more thing. Please bear in mind the Lucasfilm standards and keep it PG rated.

Okay, now for the artwork. We prefer to receive good, dark xerox copies of your artwork; something that we can keep and use in paste-ups. If you work in pencil, xerox it and darken it down. That works very well. Another good thing about this method is that the U. S. Postal Service has a tendency to misplace things, so if that happens, we can get another copy from your original. At the present time, we do not plan on reducing any material. If you still want to send originals, please make them no larger than 8½" x 11". Otherwise, it just costs us that much more at the printer.

Please keep in mind that these guidelines are not written in carbonite. If your work presents an exception, submit it--we might change our minds.

Guess that about wraps it up. Again, we hope you enjoy reading the first issue of FLIP OF A COIN and hope we will be hearing from you soon. The deadline for the second issue is April 15. We will also be including a Letters of Comment section so let us know what you think of FLIP--what you like, dislike, whatever.

Paula and Jenny

A TOAST TO INNOCENCE

Peggy Barilla

Well, shit. How in hell was he supposed to know the weather was gonna start kicking up so early this year? Come up outta nowhere like the end of the world, with none of the usual signs, and put him way off schedule. He'd only missed the gold shipment by one or two days, but by now it might as well be in Paris, France, what with all them guards and their shotguns and all. And now it looked like another storm was blowing up, about to strand him in this little town til Lord knew when, with no money to speak of in the bank, the assay office, or his pockets. Even if there was something to go after, what was the point of doing a robbery if hightailing it out of town only meant ending up in a blizzard in the middle of nowhere? Shit...

With a final sour look at the darkening October sky, Tommy Lillard huddled deeper into his duster and looked up and down the street. It wasn't such a bad town, he supposed, not that he'd ever had much of a liking for towns; it just looked so goddamned dull. He could really pick places to get himself stuck in... Had a saloon, anyway. Wasn't no Kansas City fancy house, but it was better than them boomtowns, and a hell of a lot better than nothing. Especially if he could find some friendly soul who cared to pass the storm over a hand of cards, and a friendlier soul who cared to pass it under some well-heeled winner...

A gust of wind brought Tommy back to himself. Right. A poker game, a good stiff drink, and whatever kind of girl they had in this town. First, though, he'd have to get himself a new shirt. The one he had was past all hope of patching and darning; it had been months now since Rosalie had fixed it up for him, and they hadn't been very good months, for business or personal comfort. Replacing it would cut into his meagre operating capital, but if--by some remote chance--he didn't do well at the tables, at least he wouldn't freeze to death quite so soon. He spotted the general store a few doors down across the street, and started toward it with the decisive step of the very cold.

The jangling of the bell over the door faded away as his eyes adjusted to the interior dimness, lit only by two hanging oil lanterns. Same as the general store in any one of dozens of other towns he'd seen, but duller. A portly, mustachioed storekeeper had peered out from the back at the sound of the bell, then had gone disinterestedly back to whatever had been occupying him behind the blanket curtaining the doorway. *Humpin' the preacher's wife, most likely...* He snorted in amusement at the thought, discarding a brief impulse to relieve the gentleman of the day's take in his absence. No point embarrassing them both, considering how little was probably in the till. Instead, he began looking through the pile of ready-made clothing for something to fit his frame and his finances.

He looked up at the light scuff of a footstep, becoming aware for the first time that he wasn't alone. In another corner of the store, a woman was going over the yard goods. She was dressed all in dark, somber colours, and so studious and careful had been her examination of the lengths of cloth that even Tommy's trail-heightened senses hadn't detected her. *Damn! She's quiet as a Injun. Only other person could ever do that was...* He squinted, stared. Between the flickering of the lanterns and the shadow of her bonnet it was hard to tell, but...

"Howdy, Kate."

The woman looked up into his face, startled by the touch at her elbow. No doubt about it now. It was Katie Dundee, all right--'Tomahawk Kate'. To meet her here, after all these years, and looking like that--! A broad smile spread across his face as he wondered what her game was.

The blank look changed to one of recognition, astonishment. "Tommy?" Her lips formed the name, but no sound emerged. Abruptly she stretched up to fling her arms around his neck, upsetting several bolts of cloth as she did so. As they thumped to the floor, one struck a display of coffee grinders, adding their clatter. Both of them burst out laughing, and couldn't stop even as they picked everything up, their eyes tearing and voices cracking. "Tommy Lillard," she said at last, holding him at arms' length and gazing at him fondly. "You devil, I thought you were dead. Sure smell like you are."

"Now, is that any way to talk?" he asked reproachfully, still smiling. "I thought you was up in the Dakotas, or maybe even Canada. What you doin' here, Katie? And in that gettup--"

Their noise had finally lured the shopkeeper out front. Fleeting though it was, Tommy caught the hint of apprehension in her eyes, the way they darted from him to the man behind the counter to the band that gleamed on her finger, and paused. He understood. Not wanting to jeopardise whatever scam she was working, he swept his hat off and smiled beguilingly. "I surely am sorry for bein' so clumsy, ma'am," he said, "but I was so happy to meet up with you again, after the way you saved my life, and all."

They walked their purchases over to where the stout clerk waited, all attention and congeniality now. "Saved your life, you say?"

"That's right. I had the goddamnde-- 'scuse me, ma'am. I like to died of the pleurisy one winter, except for the kind charity of this good lady here, nursin' me back to health."

The storekeeper momentarily eyed him as if he couldn't imagine why anyone would want to do such a thing, but he didn't want to offend a customer, and he'd obviously been started off on a favourite topic. "Yessir," he said, puffing up as if he were responsible, "never did find a soul more given to good works than our Mrs. Westover. If Ellerby ever gets on the map, it'll be thanks to folks like her and Reverend Westover."

Tommy started. The preacher's wife? Katie?! His earlier thought came back to him, and he was surprised to feel a twinge of jealousy. Then again, his own thoughts at seeing her again hadn't been much more polite than his unknowing joke... The twinge became a stab, all mingled with anger and embarrassment. "Reg'lar angel of mercy," he agreed absently. *Naw...must be a new partner, that's all... But what're they after, if not the gold...?*

"You gentlemen are going to have me blushing," Kate protested. "It's just Christian duty to help those in need."

"Amen," Tommy and the storekeeper chorused, and there was a lull as items were wrapped and payment made. A surreptitious glance assured Tommy that he'd been right to pass up the cashbox; filled with a great sense of moral rectitude, he put his hat back on and took up his small parcel. "I'd be pleased if you'd allow me to carry your packages for you, Miz Westover."

Kate looked searchingly at him, then nodded, and he scooped up her bundles as well, ducking ahead to open the door for her. The chill which had been blunted by the store's stove hit them fully now, a few snowflakes swirling along the wind. They stopped as the door jangled shut behind them. "Thanks," Kate said quietly.

Tommy shrugged. "Ain't no problem. But I surely would like to know what it is you're up to. Don't seem like there's nothin' in this town worth botherin' about, now that the gold is gone, but...I mean, maybe you could use another hand...?"

She blinked. "What?"

"Well, we run some good jobs, you 'n me, and..." His gaze slid sidelong from hers to stare at the miniature landscape of the hard, rutted main street. It was humiliating to ask in like that, especially from a woman, even a woman like Kate--but times had been hard, and a man had to make a living. If she'd found some exploitable angle... One mud-crusted boot scraping the plank, he met her eyes again.

It took a few moments for her uncomprehending expression to sink in. When it did, it was like a sneak punch in his tensed gut, and he almost took a step backward. Lord... What he should do now was easy. Just take her stuff to her rig, or her door, say his goodbyes and find that saloon. He really needed it now. He didn't understand what had happened here, wasn't sure he wanted to. It was none of his business, none at all. But... "Got some time, Katie?"

"For what?"

Her suspicious tone stung, but he didn't blame her for it. "I dunno... Have a drink, talk...you know. Catch up."

"Go over old times?" she asked, half-amused, half-bitter, then softened. "We did have some good ones, didn't we... But I can't be seen in a saloon, not anymore, you ought to know that. Wouldn't do either of us any good in this town, Lillard."

"I expect I could scare us up somethin'. You know someplace we could go?" He waited, expecting to be turned down, just hoping she wouldn't be too angry.

She looked at him thoughtfully. Unkempt, shabby, probably broke... *This is insane! My god, he looks terrible. Can things be that bad on the road in the middle of a gold rush? Tell him no, quick, before somebody sees--* "There's the livery stable. Weather like this gets in old man Ochsenbein's bones; he won't budge from his fire today. Place is closed down."

"All right." Suddenly reanimated, Tommy started away. "You go on. I'll get us somethin' to chase the cold and be along directly." He grinned. "We wouldn't want to be too obvious, huh?"

There isn't any 'we' anymore, she wanted to say, if there ever was to begin with. But she only nodded and watched him stride away...

Out of the biting wind, Kate paced, chafing her hands together, breathing in the sweet tang of hay and horses and exhaling a cloud of white vapour. Her bonnet lay on a bale nearby; briefly she wondered if she'd been wise to remove it, considering the conclusion Lillard was sure to draw. Maybe it was what she wanted him to think? What was she doing here?! She hadn't done something like this since she was a kid in Ohio, sneaking out to meet that Sam Brooks down by the creek... She shook her head, rather pleasantly amazed that she still remembered, then became annoyed with herself again. This was ridiculous. Someone could still come in any minute, and it was starting to snow. Andrew would be waiting for her to come home and start supper, and...and that Georgia devil's grin hadn't changed a bit, damn him... Even as hard-used as he looked to be, he brought back memories and feelings she wasn't prepared to reckon with. Not just of the time they'd spent together, on and off, but of the life he represented, that she didn't want to think about ever again. Damn him. It wasn't fair... She stiffened at the sound of the stable's small side door being pulled open. "Who's there?"

"Who the hell you think?" Tommy came in brandishing the whiskey like a trophy. "Cut some fella cards for it," he announced smugly, coming over to set it down on the bale beside her plain gray bonnet, stamping his feet in the chill. All the while he noted the unease in her face, the tension in her stance, both alien to the Katie he remembered. She'd been wild, and smart...so how had she ended up like this? Jumping at shadows and looking so tired out, getting old before her time... "Still the prettiest woman this side o' the Mississippi," he said softly.

"You didn't get any glasses?"

"Shit, honey, I don't need no glasses to see that." Despite her show of vexation, he could see the flattery pleased her. He didn't expect the Reverend paid her too many compliments in that area.

"For the whiskey, Lillard."

"Gettin' soft?" He pulled the cork with his teeth and took a long, comfortingly fiery swallow.

Stung, she glared at him, and he regretted the taunt at once. She took the bottle and drank, an act of defiance, looking her old self for one brief moment.

It wasn't a reminder Tommy needed just then. He tried to find somewhere else to look, the warmth spreading through him not entirely due to the whiskey. This had been one damn stupid idea. She didn't need him pestering her, and even if the past few months hadn't been as bad as they'd been, what did he want to go torturing himself for...? Looking off into the cluttered dimness of an apparently unused corner, he saw an old wagon, the back piled with hay. He wasn't sure he could handle that much of a temptation, but they certainly

couldn't stand here in the middle of the barn indefinitely, passing their bottle and staring at each other. And he did want to talk to her, not just about old times. He had the strange feeling that somehow, if he could tell her about San Francisco, about his misgivings, he might hit on the answer, or at the very least, finally be left in peace. Katie had managed to start a new life. 'Course, she was a woman and he allowed as how that made it different, but she'd always had good sense. Not, he had to admit, that she looked to be too big on answers or peace these days, but if she could give him any kind of clue...

"Well?" She was still waiting for acknowledgment.

"Guess y'ain't," he conceded. "Shoulda known better. Uh...listen, why don't we go sit over there?"

The mollified look she'd assumed at his apology vanished, but it was hard to tell whether what replaced it was made up more of affront or flattery, any more than he could determine whether it became relief or disappointment when he elaborated, "It's outta the draft, and outta plain sight... I just want to talk, Katie, that's all. I ain't gonna make you no trouble." *Liar!*

"Liar," she grinned, but allowed herself to be boosted up into the bed of the wagon, making no comment at the way his hands lingered just a bit longer than necessary around her waist. He clambered up after her, sitting across from her and taking the bottle back again. There was an uncomfortable silence. "Well," Katie said with a false briskness, "who goes first? How about you, sir? Care to have a crack at it?"

He laughed. "Guess I may as well, if I can figure where to start. Lessee...last I saw you was when? Forty-seven?"

"Forty-five. June."

"That so? I'll be damned... Well, anyways, early on in forty-six, I cut loose from Harry Wade. Couldn't take no more of his cousin Frank. You remember him? Boy never had the sense God gave manure. Damn near got us all hung out to Colorado, and with nary a cent to show for it!" He shook his head. "That was enough for this ol' boy. Ain't took up with nobody since. Was doin' all right for a while, too. Just a nice, easy spell of banks and trains. You know--" he made an accenting gesture with the bottle, "--folks are a lot nicer when they're bein' robbed by one person. Lots more reasonable than when they's three or four guns pointin' at 'em. You wouldn't think so, but people are funny like that..."

"I used to see the posters up on you."

"You did?" He looked flattered.

"Mm-hm. In Nebraska you're worth fifty dollars."

"Shoot, it's two hunnert in Missouri! Anyways, you could pick up the whole of Nebraska and shake it, and fifty dollars wouldn't fall out." He snorted, indignant at this blow to his professional pride.

Kate laughed, sipping at the whiskey and looking at him speculatively. "You been married again since I saw you?" she asked with a teasing smile.

"Only twice," he struggled. "Creek and a Pawnee. I didn't like that l'il Pawnee so much, but she had three brothers, so..."

"Man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," she finished, causing him to choke on a mouthful, laughing.

"Amen!" he said, wiping the back of a hand across his mouth. He saw her flinch and continued hastily. Besides, he was getting to the part he really wanted her to hear... "Well, it just went on like that til nigh onto a year ago. I was conductin' some business on this train to Akron, and I run across this rabbi." He reckoned she knew what that was, her being in the business now, so to say.

"You stole a rabbi?"

He gave her a scathing look and continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I met up with him again a little while later. He was chasin' fish with a stick, funniest thing y'ever saw. So, I helped him catch some fish, and we shared camp and got to talkin'. Turned out he was headin' for San Francisco. Come all the way from Poland just to be a rabbi there, 'n be a sorta mail-order bridgegroom. He sure enough had some shoots-paw."

She was watching him raptly, trying without success to figure out where this was leading. She'd expected wild tales of his exploits and conquests--anything but some weird story about a Jew preacher who... "Thay why he was lighting out to California? He shot his father?"

Tommy looked put-upon. "That," he declared, pleased at the opportunity to impress, "is Jewish for balls. Anyhow, I told you why he was goin'. Thing is, Avram--that's his name, Avram--had nerve enough, but he was ignorant as spit, so I figured... I mean, it was about time I made myself scarce around there anyway, and there was everybody strikin' it rich out in California, so I figured, what the hell?" He looked away, taking another drink. Even now he wasn't sure why he'd decided to shepherd Avram across country. Any reason he came up with only made him sound like a fool. "So, we rode trail together. That's where I picked up some of that talk. Well, now, there was times he made me wonder had I misjudged ol' Frank Wade, but we come through all right in the end, between him savin' me and me savin' him."

"You got him to San Francisco?"

"Yup. He had some problems at first after all that'd happened, not havin' been a worldly man, but then when he had to, he started in bein' a rabbi just as easy as you please. And I was best man at his weddin', even though he ended up marryin' a different girl than he'd been s'posed to."

Kate, her feet curled under her for warmth, studied him and quirked an eyebrow. This was the craziest story she'd ever heard from this man, whose life seemed to be made up of a series of crazy stories, a good many of them true. She took a drink and said nothing, sensing that he was getting close to the point.

"This one's the God's honest truth," he vowed, seeing the dubious look. "You shoulda seen--I had me a suit and a tie, and a shirt that crackled, and one o' them little hats. I almost wanted to rob myself, I looked so good!"

She laughed, the throaty chuckle he remembered, and he smiled back. "It was a fine ol' party, too." His voice trailed off. This was going to be harder than he'd thought, especially as distracted as he was getting...

"So what happened, Tommy?" she prompted gently.

"Well, you know, he'd took a likin' to me, on account of I'd helped him, and I was the only person he halfway knew, so he..." he shrugged. "He asked me would I stay on. They give 'im a house as part of his pay, and he said they'd put me up, 'n that after what I done for him I shouldn't have any trouble findin' me a job..." He looked at her. "Can you just see that? Me? So, I rode out. They're good people, 'n I liked them, but if... It just wouldn't'a worked out."

Kate couldn't recall ever seeing that helplessness on his face before, and it was plain to her that Tommy was afraid--afraid of hurting his friends, afraid of changing, afraid of ending up worse off than before--but also hungry for the chance being offered to him. Oh, yes, she could understand that, and sympathise. *But if you want me to help you make up your mind, Lillard, I can't. I really can't...*

There was a long silence. Then Tommy asked, "What about you? I always figured you to make it big. I swear, you could talk money out of a rock.

Right...what about me?... "There's not much to tell. I tried it up in Dakota, but there aren't any real towns up there that I could work any of my games on. There isn't even very much to outright steal." She smiled wryly. "If you picked up the whole of Dakota and shook it..." she said, and shrugged. "All I was doing was going through my stake, just barely getting by from day to day. I never did have the disposition to be a good trapper, and it was starting to look like my best bet would just be to find myself a saloon someplace and go into business, you know?" Old friends had been dying off at an alarming rate, and every day the amount in her poke had decreased. Finally, one tortured night full of wolf-howlings and hunger, Tomahawk Kate Dundee decided it was time to go straight. "Time to get off the trail," she said, continuing her thoughts aloud. "But, I had to find somewhere to get off it to. So, I sold my saddle and started south again. I don't have to tell you, the way I was looking then, I wasn't about to fool anybody, and seeing me riding Indian-style only made it worse. But, the hunting wasn't too bad, and every so often there'd be some homesteaders who wouldn't run me off. I got along."

It was now Tommy's turn to listen intently, and wonder how any of this tied in with the woman before him. He took another pull at the bottle and waited for her to continue.

"I got to this little town in Wyoming," she resumed at last. "Hardly more than a settlement, really. People were coming in from all around for some kind of spring social--a big picnic, dancing, and a revival meeting by a travelling preacher. I didn't look quite so out of place there, and it had been a long time since I'd been around folks enjoying themselves, so I stayed around for the fun. Had a decent meal, listened to a pretty good fiddle player, and at the meeting... I don't know, it was something...like being hit by lightning. Oh, I don't mean in any religious sense, you know what I've always thought about that kind of thing. No, it was Andrew Westover

himself doing it." Kate shook her head slowly. "I just knew that this was the way out I'd been looking for. When he left, I went with him. He never asked me a thing, it was like it was all understood. We found another minister to marry us, and by the time we got to Ellerby, we were ready to settle down. We've been married four years now."

"You...uh...got any kids?" Rosalie was probably expecting by now. He knew how excited Avram would be at that, and was kind of sorry he wasn't around to see it.

"One. She died when she was less than a month old. We were in Colorado."

The tight, clipped way she spoke chilled him more than the wind keening through the stable's rafters, and he didn't have to ask if there would be any more. "You happy with him, Katie?"

She looked at her hands. "It's a sin to lie to your friends," she said softly. She looked at him defensively. "He's a good man, Lillard, I won't say he isn't. He's kind, and intelligent, and generous--"

"But you don't love him."

"What difference does that make? I have the life I wanted. I've got a warm house and food to eat and..."

"If you're so happy, what're you doin' in a shut-up livery stable drinkin' rotgut whiskey and swappin' stories with an outlaw?"

"What should I be doing, then, in your opinion? Going rag-assing around the country with you, getting myself shot or hung?"

"We had good times when our trails crossed, Katie, you know we did." Times when he'd call her Tommyhawk for the way she pounced him, damn near setting their shared bedrolls afire, and he'd feel, for a while, that he'd finally found his match... There was the time they'd taken Lame Horse, Minnesota, with a combination of spiritualism and stock fraud. Not his way of doing things, but neither was starving. Katie'd always had good ideas, and he'd consoled himself with the thought that they'd made better citizens of the greedy folks in that town. And she really had nursed him back to health after that one, although there were moments when she seemed to like his coughing just fine... But what did any of that have to do with this tired, sedately-dressed woman? Whiskey and emotion had put colour back into her face, wisps of straw in her coming-undone hair giving her something of the wild look he remembered, but it was only an illusion. Like freedom, or security...

"You asking me to run off with you, Lillard?" she asked bluntly.

He closed his eyes and sighed, taking another drink. "No."

"Good. Because I would, and we'd both be sorry."

Tommy nodded. Everybody moved on. That was the thing of it--it wasn't just from place to place, it was from time to time, life to life. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but there was no point in trying to fight

it, because it was going to happen anyway. What you had to do was just try and stay in the saddle... Yes, he understood it now.

It was getting late. Almost half the bottle was gone, but Kate could still hold it with the best of them. She climbed down from the wagon unaided, brushing herself off and putting her bonnet primly on. She didn't speak, didn't look at him. He climbed down also, handing her her parcels and moving to let her out the stable door.

The overcast afternoon was fading into gray evening, and there were already lamps glowing all along the street. After a moment of indecision, Kate reached up and kissed his cheek, then was gone.

Tommy took a deep breath, the air sweet from what had become a fresh, drizzling rain. That kiss had been for a younger man, from a younger woman, and that was all right. He still had half a bottle, and this stable wasn't the worst place he'd ever had to sleep. And, if he passed up the good-timing and started off at first light, he could be in San Francisco in two weeks, if the weather held. That would be all right, too.

Drinking to the present, Tommy settled in for the night.

I CALL IT LUCK

I call it luck.
The old man said there's no such thing.
But what am I if I ain't lucky?
I don't have the Force
No matter what that old man meant.
I never believed in it.
Still don't.
Though the kid can do some pretty strange things
I can't explain.
Where would a Corellian smuggler get the Force anyway?
I'll stick with sweet Lady Luck.
She's saved my skin quite a few times.
But what about Hoth?
I could have searched that frozen snowball forever
and still not have found him.
Lady Luck pulled us both through that time.
Could it have been something else?
The kid using the Force?
Calling me?
Or something in me
Calling him?
Nah.
That's all superstitious nonsense, Solo.
It's just luck.

KARIN L. ZYGOWICZ

DEJA VU

Martie Benedict

Well, they got your number, and they nailed you again
And they're givin' you all kinds of shit.
Got enforcement problems that they need to get solved,
Got some replicants that need to get hit.
And they ain't takin' no for an answer this time--
And they ain't takin' no kind of flak.
Cause you got the magic, you're a killin' machine,
And they want their old Blade Runner back.

You want to tell them all to go straight to hell, I know.
You want to run, don't want to kill, but they give you a gun
and you will.

Never thought you'd be here, but you're back on the street.
Thought you'd dropped out of the race.
Goin' in circles, gettin' trashed out and beat up
And they're makin' a mess of your face.
And the same old hurtin' still is gettin' you down,
And givin' you shakes in the dark.
Just like a spring, and you're too tightly wound.
Gonna make you miss a chance at your mark.

You want to tell them all to go straight to hell, I know.
You want to rest, actin' blind, from the mess in your mind.

How did it happen, all you wanted was out,
All you wanted to be was just quit?
How do they have it, this invincible clout,
Point a finger at you and you're it?
And there ain't no recourse, ain't no place to complain
When they hand you their enemies' list.
Just keep movin' through the goddamn rain
And hopin' there ain't something you missed.

You want to tell them all to go straight to hell, I know.
Bound to lose, it's such a waste, the blues are all over your case.

Just keep doin' your thing, keep on movin'.
Only way you can survive.
It ain't yourself that you've got to be provin',
The main thing is staying alive.
And don't get side-tracked with a lot of distractions--
A woman can kill you on sight.
Keep a lid on your lovin' reactions
And take care of business tonight.

You want to tell them all to go straight to hell, I know.
Close your heart, there's nothin' there. It'll drag you apart
if you care.

Deja vu is killing you.

Author's Note

A RAINBOW ABOVE YOU is based on characters and situations from the film HEROES, written by James Carabatsos and directed by Jeremy Paul Kagan. However, several of the characters herein are the inventions of Sherry Magee and myself. These include Ken's cousins Phil and Sandy and their family, as well as Annie McBride. This story is the fourth in a series and is preceded by three stories authored by Sherry Magee: CHANGES and HOME FOR CHRISTMAS, which appeared in FACETS, and HALLOWEEN TALES, which can be found in the current issue of SYNDZINE. The lyrics quoted here are from DESPERADO, copyright 1973 by Glenn Frey and Don Henley of the Eagles, and are taken from the version of the song which appears on the album of the same name.

A RAINBOW ABOVE YOU

D. C. Wickes

Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?
You've been out riding fences for so long now.
Oh, you're a hard one, but I know that you've got your reasons.
These things that are pleasing you still hurt you somehow.

Don't you try the Queen of Diamonds, boy, she'll beat you if she's able.
The Queen of Hearts is always your best bet.

Ken Boyd guided his grandfather's old Ford pickup carefully through the frigid March night, making the left off Missouri Highway 5 onto the spur that would take him toward High Point, down the last fifteen miles to his grandparents' farm. The new tires sang in the heavy rain, a low steady hum vibrating through the frame of the truck, relaxing some of the tension in Ken's back muscles. The cab of the pickup was loaded with Gram's groceries and the weekly ordeal of Sedalia lay forty long miles behind him and another six days ahead. He could afford to relax.

Ken pulled his fourth Budweiser from the six pack on the seat beside him, opened it one-handed, and took a long pull. The heavy eyebrows over his intense hazel eyes eased and the crooked mouth beneath the crooked nose lost some of the tightness at its corners. Might be another letter from Eureka waiting when he got home. Jack and Carol wrote him regularly every other week; news about them, about the business, and about Kendra, six weeks old now. The corner of

Ken's mouth quirked--who'd have thought someone would name a kid after him? And a little girl at that? He thought of the color Poloroids taped to the wall of his tiny trailer; Jack and Carol holding the baby and Kendra's face crinkled in a toothless grin. Ken took another long pull at his beer and frowned once more. They were sure to ask again why he didn't come out to California and live with them, help with the business and get to know his young namesake. And when the letter went unanswered as they all did, Jack and Carol would call as they always had, once a month; ever since the first call three weeks after he'd given Jack the keys to his Camaro and waved the two of them off down the driveway.

It had seemed only fair then, when Jack had showed up in Sedalia the previous spring needing Ken's help, that one of the Worm Squad should have his chance to find his rainbow. Back in the jungles of Vietnam it had been Jack who had pulled the four of them into the worm farm business, which they had all planned to run together after the war. Jack had made it their own special dream, using his sheer enthusiasm to transform four mismatched Cav grunts into the Worm Squad--Munroe, the King; Adcox, the Duece; Jack, yeah, old Jungle Jack; and Ken, the Ace of Diamonds. Ken snorted bitterly to himself. Sure, it seemed that Jack had made it, found his rainbow. He had a job, a wife, and a child. But Munroe had died saving his buddies, and Adcox had disappeared, walking away one morning from a life he couldn't handle. And Ken...

Ken had chased his own rainbow on his return home by finally buying his long-desired racing Camaro, the Ace car that he'd planned to drive to glory on the big tracks outside St. Louis and Chicago. Although long work had brought the car to peak performance, Ken soon found that he couldn't get in and race it. For some reason he didn't really understand, he'd persisted in going to the track just outside Sedalia every Saturday and enduring the razzing from the other drivers and work crews when he didn't run. But whatever had once been young and reckless in him was gone, leaving him unable to take the car into competition and unable to defend himself when the harassment of the others took a more physical turn.

So Ken had meant it when he'd told Jack he didn't really want the car. He'd known then, though he couldn't find the words to explain it to his friend, that Jack would drive the Camaro into a future that Ken could still only turn away from. When Jack had called to tell him that the car had been destroyed, Ken had assured him that it was all right, that it didn't matter. He'd meant it, too--yeah, he was really glad the car was gone. Now he didn't have to pretend he was the Ace of Diamonds any more. Now he could be what he felt like. Just Kenny Boyd.

Ken drained his beer and crushed the can in his hand, tossing it into one of the bags containing his own groceries. Wouldn't do to be too obvious about his drinking--it always upset Gram. He was almost home when tail-lights appeared out of the rain on the dark road ahead of him, and he braked gently as he came up behind a muddy five-by-eight U-Haul with a California license. By easing a bit over the center line he was able to see it was being pulled by an equally travel-stained Ford van also bearing a California plate. The driver was creeping along at only twenty-five and as Ken swung out left to pass, the trailer's right blinker came on, brake lights flashed, and the van made a slow easy turn into a wide gravel drive leading off the main road.

Fool's lost! thought Ken to himself. *No one's lived on the McBride farm for at least two years. An' he's gonna take a three-quarter ton van and a loaded trailer over that old wooden bridge! Sucker's gonna end up in the creek.*

On an impulse, Ken gunned the old truck (which, thanks to long Sunday afternoons he'd spent under the hood, did not complain). He hung a hard left just around the trailer, then a vicious right into the drive ahead of the van, cutting it off sharply. Even as the other vehicle slewed off the drive into the mud, the driver found a free hand to blast angrily on the horn. Ken grinned as he cut the truck's engine. He left the headlights on and popped them into full intensity with the floor button. Zipping up his old Army jacket and jamming his cap with the blue and gold NAPA logo firmly on his head, he climbed out into the downpour. This was gonna be interesting.

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" the girl shouted at him as she slipped from the driver's seat of the van and stormed coatless through the chill rain up to a startled Ken, who promptly backed off. "You could've made me have a wreck!" She turned and peered through the darkness at her van, its nose buried in a huge old blueberry bush. The trailer rested at an awkward angle behind it. "In fact," she reconsidered, "you may have anyway." She stalked through the mud to inspect her rig, Ken trailing behind her.

"I was tryin' to keep you from havin' a wreck, miss," he tried to explain as she bent over her trailer hitch. "This farm's vacant; that bridge ain't been kept up. Treadways are missin' boards and the crosspieces are old. You'd 'a gone clean through. You lost?"

"Gone through the bridge?" She turned to face him, her gray eyes wide. "It's unsafe?"

"For you an' that rig, yes, ma'am. Too much weight."

"Oh." She considered that. "I'm sorry, then; I--lost? I don't think so. Is this the Earnest McBride farm?"

Ken nodded, rainwater rolling from the brim of his cap.

"Well, my name is Annie McBride, and this place is mine--I've driven four days from San Francisco to get here. But now..." Her voice trailed off as she studied his face in the harsh beams of the pickup's headlights. Her eyes widened even more beneath her dripping hair.

"Ken Boyd? Kenny? Hey, don't you remember me?" She began to smile.

"Why, yeah," Ken said slowly. He remembered a tall, thin, dark-haired girl who'd spent summers on the McBride farm with her grandparents. The Boyd farm was just across a low ridge, and for three months each year, Annie, Kenny and Ken's cousins Sandy and Phil had been inseparable. Then, the summer Ken turned fifteen and Annie twelve, her folks had been killed in a head-on collision outside of Sedalia and the girl had gone to live with her mother's family in San Francisco. The Boyd trio hadn't seen her since then.

"Sure, kid, I remember you," Ken grinned. "Been a long time. You just look different now, that's all."

Annie grinned back at him. "So do you. Say, Kenny, can I cross the bridge safely on foot?"

"Oh, uh, sure. No problem."

"Good. Thanks for warning me about it. I'm sorry I swore at you." She grinned again. "Though I don't know why I should apologize to you. You're the one who taught me how!"

"You were a real fast learner, too, honey," he laughed.

"You bet!" she laughed with him. "Well, thanks again. Give my love to your grandparents, too--you're still living with them down the road?"

"Yeah. Right across the ridge."

"Gram'll twist your ear off when she sees how soaked you are. You better get on home. Good night!" She turned toward the van and walked away from him through the rain. Ken thought he saw her shoulders fall a bit as she looked at her rig. Then she seemed to square them as she opened the driver's door, pulled her keys from the ignition, swung the door shut and walked around the blueberry bush to the passenger side.

Puzzled, Ken followed and found the side doors open and Annie rummaging in the interior. "This thing's stuck but good, Annie," he observed unnecessarily. "You can't move it tonight."

"I know. I'm just getting my bedroll and some overnight things. I can hike up to the house and spend the night there; I'll worry about this mess in the morning." She pulled a quilted down jacket on over her soaking cotton shirt and stuffed a flashlight into a pocket. Next she pulled out a bulging knapsack and shrugged into it, and a sleeping bag which she hefted onto her hip as she locked the van. Ken grabbed the bag from her and took her arm.

"Kid, you ain't luggin' this stuff a mile and a half down that road on a night like this. Pappy's pickup can make it across that bridge okay. You climb in and I'll drive you up to the house and get a fire goin' for you." He began to steer her toward the truck.

"No, Kenny," she protested, although not very strongly. "You're on your way home." Ken tossed her things into the truck bed and pulled an old tarp over them, then opened the door for her.

"Won't take long," he stated, and bundled her into the front seat among the grocery bags. Climbing in the other side, he started the pickup and switched the heater on "High," aiming the vents in her direction. Then he reached down behind the seat and produced an old wool blanket which he tucked around her. "Remember this?" he asked, pulling it up over her shoulders.

"One of your Grandgram's lovely old Hudson Bays, isn't it?" She snuggled down into the warm, scratchy folds. "Your grandpa used to wrap us in these when he took us to the Sedalia drive-in. Remember how he'd fill the truck bed with hay? We'd fall asleep on the way home, burrowed down in it and covered with her blankets."

"Yeah," Ken said softly as he slipped the truck into gear, "those were good times."

"Yes, they were," she murmured, closing her eyes and pulling the blanket tight.

Ken glanced at her a moment, then piloted the old Ford slowly and carefully across the decrepit bridge and off down the winding dirt road.

* * *

Although Ken pulled up to the old farm house just a few minutes later, Annie had already fallen asleep. He cut the pickup's engine and leaned over, shaking her gently. "Hey, kid. Annie, wake up. We're here."

Annie came awake quickly. "Sorry. Guess I'm more tired than I thought." Embarrassed, she folded the blanket and lay it over the grocery bags. Pulling her flashlight out of her jacket pocket, she tugged at the door handle and hopped out into the rain. Ken reached beneath the seat, pulled out an old-fashioned six volt spotlight, and left the truck to dash after her through the weed-choked dooryard up onto the broad wraparound porch. Annie fitted her key into the old Craftsman lock and tried to turn it, but it would not budge.

"Wait a second," said Ken. He ran to the truck and returned a moment later with a can of WD-40. Removing the key from the lock, he squirted some of the lubricant into the keyhole. The key slipped back in easily. "Try it," he urged. Annie did, and with a heavy 'click' the bolt slid back. She pushed the heavy door open and their two flashlight beams played about the interior.

They revealed a gloomy sight. Broken panes in the big bay windows allowed the rain and chill night air into the house. Several small leaks pattered in counterpoint to the steady sound of the rain on the roof, and puddles on the warped hardwood floor had spread to the baseboarding, buckling it away from the wall in some places. A few pieces of furniture were scattered about the huge living room, but they were covered with mildewed tarps and cobwebs.

Annie finally stepped over the threshold and into the house. A board creaked beneath her foot. Her flashlight discovered the huge old fireplace--both hearth and woodbin were bare. The beam of light wavered a bit and Ken realized her shoulders were shaking.

He walked up behind her, hesitated, threw an arm round her.

"You okay, honey?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, I'm fine," Annie sniffed, wiped her eyes. "I'm just tired, that's all. And there seems a lot more to do than I expected.

"It'll be all right," Ken assured her. "No problem. Nothin' here a little good carpentry won't take care of. Now you go check the woodbox in the pantry--they should have filled it before they shut the house up. I'll go get your stuff from the truck." He released her shoulders, patted her on the back, and disappeared out the front door.

* * *

Twenty minutes later Ken had filled the woodbin and a blazing fire had driven some of the damp chill from the room. Annie's bedroll had been spread on the hearth and they sat crosslegged on it, she in dry thermals and a heavy robe and Ken in his shirt with his Grandgram's blanket wrapped around his shoulders. They were sharing Ken's last two beers and a joint that Annie had produced from her knapsack. Relaxing in the fire's warmth, gazing dreamily into the flames, for a long time they listened to the rain on the roof in silence.

Ken's jacket, hanging to dry from a wooden stool near the fire, finally caught Annie's eye. She looked curiously at the embroidered patch on the left sleeve. A thick black diagonal cut left to right across a gold shield and a horse's head filled the upper right corner.

"What does the patch on your jacket mean, Kenny?" she asked.

He blinked, turning his gaze from the fire to her. "My division insignia," he murmured.

"Your division? You were in the Army?"

"First Cavalry Division." Ken finished his beer and with a swift motion crushed the empty can against his forehead. Annie winced. He reached across to take the joint from her hand. "Where do you think I first ran across this shit?" he asked, taking a long drag and passing it back to her.

"First Cavalry Division?" Annie questioned. "Horses?"

"Nah, choppers." His face grew hard.

"You saw combat?"

"Now, honey, you just never mind what I saw," he snapped. "Anyway, what about you? Why'd you leave San Francisco to come here? There's nothin' 'round here."

"That's what everyone in San Francisco said," Annie laughed, taking a hit and exhaling with a sigh. "That's just fine with me. I've been doing advertising work until last year, illustrating ads, when I got a chance to illo two childrens' books. They did well enough to get me several other offers that paid more money. Then, in October, my great-aunt Charlotte passed away and left this farm to me. So I had the ways and means to leave the city, and I was sort of ready to, at least for a while." A frown flitted briefly across her face, and she sipped at her beer. "Anyway, I decided to move, to fix up this house and live here while I do my painting and decide what to do with this place. And with myself." She glanced around her. "I've got my work cut out for me, though. Can you recommend a good carpenter? And a good towing service?" she laughed.

"Hell," Ken chuckled. "I'll get your rig out of that bush, don't worry."

"I'd appreciate that," Annie smiled. "But I'll need to fix the bridge before I worry about the van. Do you know someone I can call?"

"Ahh, there's nobody around here knows what they're doin'," Ken stated, unfurling his long legs and sticking his stocking feet up close to the fire. "If you're gonna do something, you oughtta do it right," he muttered almost to himself. "That's what Pappy always says."

"You and Pappy always built such beautiful things. I still have the toy chest you two made years ago for my birthday. Keep my files in it."

"You do? Damn."

"Say, would <u>you</u> help me, Kenny?" Annie asked suddenly.

"Me?" He sounded startled.

"Why not?" she persisted. "You're right next door, and you're a great carpenter. You could teach me how to help you. And I'd much rather work with someone I know," she added.

"Now wait a second, Annie," Ken warned, "you don't know me--I mean, you ain't seen me in a long time."

It was her turn to be startled. "What difference does that make?"

"Ahh, none, I guess," he said slowly, considering. He made a grab for her beer, stole a long pull, and handed it back to her. "Yeah, Annie, 'course I'll help you. No problem."

"Oh, Kenny, thanks!" She moved to hug him, but he pulled away and reached for his boots. "I've got to get back home," he said as he tugged the Wellingtons on and got to his feet. "You climb in that sleeping bag and stay warm tonight, or you'll catch one hell of a cold. Fire ought to burn through the night. I'm leavin' my big flashlight here in case you need it." He set it down at the head of her bedroll.

Annie shed her robe and crawled wearily into the sleeping bag as Ken pulled his jacket on. He bent over to zip the bag up from the outside, then spread the old woolen blanket over it. "I'll see you in the morning," he said, heading for the door.

"Thanks for everything, Kenny," answered a muffled voice. "Sleep well."

Ken thought about the nightmares.

"Thanks, honey," he replied. "You, too."

* * *

Their childhood friendship was easily renewed, and it quickly deepened throughout that spring, surprising and disturbing both of them. Although at first Annie had hired Ken to work with her only on the weekends, soon he had begun dropping in on her during the week as well, remarking that he needed to make certain she didn't undo everything he did by working unsupervised. Annie found herself depending heavily on Ken's help as they worked together on the house and grounds. She opened up and cleaned the place, hung curtains, oiled hinges and locks, laid shelf paper and scraped old paint and wallpaper off the walls, while Ken hooked up the gas stove and heaters, cleared the roof of old branches and years of accumulated leaves, and reshingled the leaky areas. Together they dug a kitchen garden, set new panes in the broken windows, and tugged the rotting furniture into the pickup to be hauled to the dump. Six days were spent sanding the hardwood floors and replacing the molding on the windows and walls. In the evenings, Annie would bring out a six-pack or a joint, or both, and they would sit together until long after dark eating dinner on the floor, picnic style, making plans for further remodeling. While helping Annie move in, Ken had found her neglected guitar, and when she confessed her ineptitude, he brought his own six string over and spent long hours in the evening teaching and playing with her.

Ken found himself more and more eager in the mornings to get up and get over the ridge to work on the old farmhouse. He hadn't realized how lonely the long days on the Boyd farm had been until Jack and Carol had passed through the year before. After their goodbyes, and his cousin Sandy's departure for college, it had been agonizingly brought home to him. The nightmares had begun to increase, and many nights Ken laid awake for hours, drinking and waiting for the sky to turn light, because anything was better than falling asleep. All that had changed since Annie had moved in and enlisted his help in her renovations, and Ken didn't know if he wanted to think too deeply about why. Annie reminded Ken of Jack in her refusal to be defeated by the endless problems that the old house continued to confront them with. He was content to follow in the wake of her enthusiasm and be carried along by it. Ken also enjoyed the respect with which Annie asked and considered his advice and suggestions; it had been a long time since anyone had held him in that regard.

By the end of April, the house was becoming snug and habitable, and Ken realized that Annie would soon begin to think seriously about either committing herself to the place as a home or selling it and returning to California. Ken was aware of her uncertainty, but carefully avoided indicating his own wishes in the matter. He didn't want either one of them to know how he felt.

They were nailing new baseboarding along the dining room walls late one May afternoon when the telephone rang. Ken listened with half an ear as he directed his real attention to fitting a corner piece into place. A few swift blows with his hammer and the molding was secured. "That sucker's done," he said softly to himself with satisfaction, rocking back on his heels and surveying the room. His face twisted into a frown as the conversation from the next room became louder and he grew aware of the distress in Annie's voice. Suddenly, with an exclamation, she slammed the receiver down. Appearing a moment later in the kitchen door and trying to disguise her unhappiness, she grinned widely and looked around the completed room. "Oh, Ken, it looks wonderful!"

"We can start painting tomorrow," he affirmed through a mouthful of nails as he emptied his carpenter's apron into the boxes scattered around his open tool chest.

Annie laughed. "I'm going to have to use at least three coats of paint just to cover up your artwork!" She indicated the neatly penciled figures, plans and measurements covering the bare walls. Untying her carpenter's apron and laying her hammer down, she headed for the kitchen. "With all the extra time you've been giving me, we'll be finished a lot sooner than I thought," she remarked over her shoulder.

Ken watched her as she left the room. He stood and stretched, then walked over to the window and gazed out of it, considering her remark. She was right; he had been spending a lot of time on this job.

"Better watch what?" Annie asked as she tossed him his reward from the kitchen door.

"Huh?" he asked as he snatched the icy can from the air.

Annie sat crosslegged on the floor next to the tool box and popped the top on her can. Gathering up a pile of spilled nails, she began putting them back into their box. "You said 'Better watch it, buddy' when I came in. What had I better watch?"

"Ahhh, nothin'. Just talkin' to myself." Ken sat down next to her. "I can start on those worktables and shelves in the studio as soon as the walls are painted, if that's what you want. You're gonna have to decide what you're gonna do soon."

"As a matter of fact," she said slowly, "I decided last night. My agent called with another offer for a book, and I told her to go ahead and finalize it this week. It looks as if I'm going to be able to stick to my plan and keep this place. I'll have to go to California a few times a year, of course, but otherwise I'm free to stay here and work. So we'll not only begin on the studio and library, but the barn as well--eventually I'm going to start looking for a horse."

"You're gonna be stayin', then?" Ken fought the warm flush he felt racing through his chest. He was careful not to let on how pleased he was. "Thought sure you'd be ready to go back by now--be missin' your friends and the city and all. It's pretty quiet 'round here."

"My friends," Annie said unhappily, leaning back on her elbows and studying her toes with great concentration. "That was one of my 'friends' on the phone just now. She was telling me that I'm crazy to stay here; filled me in on all the 'news' I came here to get away from. I never have understood people who enjoy hurting other people, and I don't want to try any more. I'm out of their games now, and I'm never going back." The sudden hard edge of defiance in her voice startled Ken, and he sought to change the subject.

"Well," he began, "Sandy's taking summer classes in vet school over to U. of M. I don't see her much, but she's still getting home a few weekends. She could help you look for a good horse--you want me to ask her?"

"That would be great!" agreed Annie. "I'd like to see her again. Your grandparents, too. I haven't been over to visit them since I've been back and I feel badly about it. They always treated me like one of their own, especially that last summer, and I'll never forget it." A smile lit her face. "Say, maybe we could all get together for dinner one afternoon--if I can talk Gram into letting me help her in the kitchen."

"I don't think so," Ken shook his head. "They're gettin' pretty old--they don't see folks much these days."

"Well, all the more reason I should go over and say hello. Give your grandmother some help with the housework. If I know you," she teased, "you're falling all over yourself doing things for Pappy, but you wouldn't think of offering to help Gram do the floors or take down the curtains to be washed."

"I told you before, you don't know me!" Ken snapped without thinking. Seeing the look of hurt surprise on Annie's face, he dropped his eyes and studied his beer can. "Look, I told you, it ain't a good idea. Okay?"

"Of course, Kenny." Startled, Annie was silent for a moment. She leaned back against the wall and gazed around the bare room, trying to think of a way to regain their light mood. "This is a really fine old house, you know," she began. "But I couldn't have gotten it in this shape without your help, Kenny. Thanks." She smiled at him and he grinned back apologetically. Annie snatched his NAPA cap from his head, laughing at his dumbfounded face, and jammed it on her own dark hair. She peered at him from beneath the bright blue bill.

I'm going to really enjoy living and working here," she proclaimed. "This place is going to be beautiful when we've finished with it, wait and see!"

Caught by the enthusiasm and determination in her voice, Ken forgot his sudden tension and nodded happily. "Yeah, kid," he agreed. "It sure is."

* * *

You lose it all, your highs are lows.
Ain't it funny how the feeling goes
Away . . .

The late September sun burned hot on Ken's bare back, and he buried his axe blade in the oak bole that served as his chopping block and straightened up. Pulling his red bandana from his jeans, Ken wiped his face and neck free of sweat. He was close to the end of a long afternoon spent breaking up an oak that had been brought down by lightning in last week's roofrattler. It had been a big old tree, and the lengths he was splitting would fill his grandparents' fireplace for most of the winter. Ken figured on hauling some over to Annie's the next day. *I'd better build her a woodbox for her back porch, too,* he thought to himself; *the one in the pantry isn't really big enough.* Plans for the project began to turn in his mind as he stuffed the bandana back in his pocket and returned to his work.

Annie could hear the sound of his axe as she came down the path from her place. As the farm came into view, she glanced around, surprised at its rundown condition. Although there were signs of recent work about, the general air of neglect was overwhelming. A tiny travel trailer stood up on concrete blocks a few hundred yards behind the main house, and Annie recognized some of Ken's clothes hanging to dry on a clothesline that stretched between a corner of the trailer and an oak standing nearby. *Surely he doesn't live there?* she thought. *Why not in his grandparents' house?*

As Annie drew closer and looked about, she spotted Ken at work and stopped to watch. She suddenly realized she had never seen him without his shirt before, and her eyes narrowed with concern as she studied the lean, muscled back, realizing for the first time how thin he was. She picked her way down the side of the hill and through the broken place in the rail fence where the path entered the rear of the Boyd farmyard, and approached the woodpile. "Hello!" she called to Ken's back. "Surprise! You've got company!"

Ken's back stiffened and he whirled to face her. Annie gasped--across his left shoulder crawled an ugly spider tracing of scar tissue, ragged-edged and startlingly white against his fresh sunburn. His expression shifted quickly from surprise to panic, to a cold hardness that made his face unrecognizable to her. "What the hell are you doing here?" Ken lunged for his shirt and pulled it on rapidly. "Who told you you could come over here?" he demanded.

Annie was speechless--she was too shocked at his sudden anger.

Ken stared at her for a long moment, his chest heaving and his face twisted. His arms were stiff, his fists clenched, and Annie instinctively stepped back from him. Abruptly, Ken turned his back and began to walk quickly away toward his trailer. After a moment, Annie began to follow him, calling his name.

"Ken, I'm sorry! The van won't start, I just needed a jump--Kenny, what's wrong?" She stopped in her tracks as he disappeared into the trailer and slammed the door behind him. Unbelieving, she stood still for a moment, waiting as if he'd just run in to get his jacket and would come back shortly to take her into town. But his door remained firmly closed. Annie finally turned away and started back to her house, her thoughts swimming.

* * *

Lyberger '82

Three weeks later Ken still dominated Annie's thoughts as she drove back home from the post office in High Point, where she'd gone to mail a package containing the drawings completing the first of her contracts. She should have been elated, but instead she found herself caught in a confused depression. Polly Jameson, the postal clerk, had known Annie since she was small and insisted on chatting every time Annie came in. In the course of their conversation Miss Polly had noticed Annie's neatly lettered card advertising for a carpenter and inquired about it.

"I'm putting it up on your bulletin board, Miss Polly," Annie had told the old woman. "I've almost finished the work on my house, thanks to Ken Boyd. But he has a lot to do for his grandfather this time of year, and I need someone for just a little while to take care of the odds and ends." Annie hadn't seen or heard from Ken since the day she'd visited his farm, and she was certain by now that she would not see him again.

"Whatever he's doin', Kenny ain't helping his Pappy, I'll wager," fussed Miss Polly. "That boy ain't done a worthwhile thing since he got back from the war. There's somethin' wrong with him, and it's just as well for you that he's not hanging around your place any more."

"What do you mean?" Annie had questioned.

"Just what I said. He ain't right. Why, didn't you hear what happened over to Sedalia last summer? He and his uncle George were walking down Main Street when the Newswatch helicopter went over. That boy spooked like a chick runnin' from a hawk--grabbed his uncle and threw him right down on the walk and held him there. Lucky thing George wasn't hurt! He wouldn't explain--he never talks to anybody. Won't do a thing to help the folks that raised him keep their place up. He's a loner and not to be trusted."

"Are you saying he's dangerous?" Annie persisted.

"I'm saying you're well shut of him. Now Ben Hubbard's boy's a fair hand with a hammer. I'll point out your little card to him when he comes in next. And don't you forget," she called after Annie. "I want to see that place of yours when it's all fixed up!"

Annie swung the van into her drive and rumbled over the bridge she and Ken had repaired together. Is he really dangerous? she wondered. Surely not! I can't believe he'd hurt anyone--at least not anyone he knows well. But there <u>is</u> something horribly wrong there.

Gravel crunched beneath the van's radials, and the sound of gunfire chattered, uninvited, in her memory. Annie had known since she moved into her house that someone, from time to time, went up on the ridge late at night and fired an automatic rifle, a weapon she knew to be strictly illegal. Annie felt the gunman had to be Ken. She'd once found a pile of brass casings lying scattered in the yellowed grass on the crest of the hill, on the Boyd farm side. But she'd never gone up the hill while the firing was going on. Ken never spoke of the war, and Annie had not pressed him, but she knew he'd been deeply affected by it in many ways. Often since the day on Ken's farm she'd tried to piece together the mystery of his behavior, and could come up with only the fleeting glimpses of his memories she'd occasionally seen him reveal. Unhappy, unhealthy, even tormented she knew Ken was. But surely not dangerous? Why the gun, then?

Annie pulled the van into the dooryard and jumped out. Her eyes automatically scanned the path on the hill for a patch of bright blue and gold coming through the trees; she caught herself and went up onto the porch and into the house, closing the door firmly behind her.

Dammit! she cried to herself, *I swore never again! I've plenty of my own problems, and my own memories to deal with. I sure don't need <u>that</u> kind of heartache--to hell with him!*

Dropping her purse on a chair, Annie headed for her studio. Her fingers were fumbling along the wall for the light switch when something glittered in the corner and caught her eye. Flicking the lights on, Annie crossed the room to the shelves against the far wall. She reached for the top one and brought down a replica of a Halloween cat, cut from three-quarter inch plywood and painted black. It had been the luminous paint of the cat's eye which had glittered in the dark corner of the room, drawing Annie's attention. She turned the cat over in her hands. It looked rather battered; the tail had been broken off at one time and reattached with glue and popsicle stick splints. Annie recalled that it had been just over fifteen years since the Halloween night Ken had handed her a broom with the cat nailed to its base as his contribution to her witch's costume.

A gust of wind rattled the branches of the big pines next to the house, and Annie's reminiscent smile faded. She dropped the painted wood figure into her wastebasket where it landed with a hollow thud, the tail broken again by its fall. Annie tried to return the cat's forlorn look with an angry glare, but finally bent to retrieve the pieces. Using her toe to open the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet, she slipped the plywood cutout in, then pushed the drawer shut and left the room.

* * *

Ken dropped the empty Valvoline can to the ground and replaced the oil cap in the old pickup. Bending over, he retrieved the funnel from the can, wiped it off with an old rag, replaced it in its plastic bag and reached into the truck to slide it up under the front seat. He slammed the truck's hood down and was using another rag to wipe the oil from his hands when his grandmother walked up to him.

"Kenny, here's the grocery list and money," she said, handing it to him. "Oh, I forgot to write it down there, but see if you can't find a nice turkey for Sandy's visit."

"Yes, Gram," Ken nodded. Stuffing the list and money into his pocket, he opened the door to the truck and climbed inside.

"You haven't been over to the McBride place lately, Kenny," continued his grandmother. "When you go next, why don't you ask Annie if she'd like to join us for dinner Labor Day? I'm sure Sandy would love to see her, and so would your grandfather and I. I know she's been busy with her work, but she hasn't been over to visit and I thought perhaps she was waiting for an invitation."

"I won't be goin' over any more, Gram," Ken said tersely. "I've finished all the work she needed my help for." He turned the key in the ignition, and the truck engine fired into life.

"Well, perhaps you could stop by and ask her anyway. Polly tells me she's a very nice girl. Your grandfather and I have been real happy to see you spending so much time over there."

"I don't think so, Gram." He put the truck in gear. "It ain't like that."

"Oh," she said, "I see. Well, drive carefully, Kenny, and try to be home before dark." She stepped back from the truck.

"Yes, ma'am."

The old woman's eyes followed the pickup as Ken drove rapidly away, and she shook her head sadly as she looked after him.

* * *

Ain't it hard to be all alone?
Now there's no time left to borrow.
Is there gonna be anything left?

"Damn!"

Annie dropped her hammer to the straw-covered barn floor and lifted her hand to her mouth. It was the second time that day that she'd hit the same finger. She'd been trying to repair the barn by herself, but the dampness of the lumber made the power saw buck in her hands and the two by tens were heavy to lift and hold in place for nailing with only two hands. Her notice for a carpenter had been up in the post office for two weeks and she'd received no calls. *It doesn't matter*, she told herself--*I can do this on my own. I don't need anybody's help! It's my place, and I'll fix it myself.* Grimly, she bent to lift the board again, straining to hold it in place with her shoulder while she tried to drive a nail through the damp, resisting wood.

Her concentration was entirely on her task and she almost jumped a foot when a soft-spoken voice asked, "Need any help?"

Dropping the board and hammer again, she whirled to see Ken sillouetted in the barn door, his cap in his hands. She frowned and turned her back on him. "I can manage, thanks." She lifted her board and returned to work, although she could see by the shadow on the wall next to her that he remained in the doorway.

"Ahh, Sandy's gonna be back in town this weekend. You still want me to have her call you?" he inquired.

"Please," managed Annie around a mouthful of nails.

Ken still hung in the door, scuffling in the straw with the toe of his boot. "I thought I might drive you two around in the pickup while you're lookin'. Help you get your horse home, when you find him," he offered.

"Don't do me any favors," snapped Annie, hammering furiously.

Ken coughed. "Guess you're still mad at me, huh?"

"Does it matter?" she questioned angrily, turning to glare at him. "You made it pretty clear how you felt the last time we saw each other. I've left you alone, which is what I thought you wanted. What difference does it make to you how I feel?"

Ken hung his head. "I...it does make a difference," he managed. "I don't guess you'd accept an apology?"

"I don't want anything from you."

"Oh. Ahh, not even this?" He walked over to her, held out his cap. Suddenly a tiny head appeared from within, with two huge eyes startlingly gold against the dark fur. "Meow!" it said.

"Oh...." Annie lay her hammer and nails aside and took the kitten from its nest in the crown of Ken's cap. She began to stroke it and was immediately rewarded by a disproportionately noisy purr.

"She's your barn cat," Ken explained. "You're gonna need one if you're gonna have feed in here." He looked around him and remarked, "You want to get you a good tight box to lock it up in, too. You've got a lot of work yet to do on this heap."

"I know. I'm getting to it." Annie's tone had softened, but she was still not mollified. "I'd better get her into the house. Thank you, Kenny," she said politely, and breezed past him out into the sunlight.

She heard from the kitchen a few minutes later the sound of hammering coming from the barn. Frowning, she placed the kitten on the floor with a small bowl of milk, pulled two cans of Budweiser from the refrigerator and walked back outside.

Ken was finishing the stall she'd been struggling with when Annie reentered the barn. She watched him thoughtfully from the doorway for a few minutes, then called, "Kenny, catch!" and tossed him his can.

His big hand captured it neatly, and he nodded his thanks.

"Kenny, we have to talk." Annie sat down on a pile of straw and opened her Bud, motioning for him to join her. Somewhat warily, he did.

"Kenny," she began, "I like you, very much--I thought you knew that. I've missed you a great deal these past few weeks. But Kenny, I've got to know--"

"Why?" he interrupted, a touch of desperation in his voice. "I made an ass of myself. I'm sorry."

Annie shook her head. "Not good enough." She rolled the beer thoughtfully between her palms. "This may be hard for you to understand--" She looked sideways at his cocked head.

"I left San Francisco for a lot of reasons--I haven't told you all of them. For years I've wanted to get out of commercial advertising and illustrate books, but my agent always advised me against it. He told me that he'd submitted my portfolio to literary houses and it had been rejected all around. So for years, I thought I just wasn't good enough--thought I was only a hack artist.

Lybarger-82

"Then, last summer, I met one of those publishers at a reception and she asked me when I was going to send a portfolio to her. I told her I had, but that it had been returned. She said that she had never had a submission from me, and when I made some calls later that week, I found myself being told the same story by editors all over town. It seems that my agent hadn't sent my work around at all, because I was making more money working in advertising."

Annie stopped to sip her beer and take a long breath. "I was married to him for six years. He lied to me and held me back almost the entire time, and I never caught on. He's no longer my agent or my husband, and that's the main reason San Francisco is no longer my home. I came here to hide, really. But then I found you again, and you were different--the first person in a long time that I trusted to be...safe to relax around. To be friends with. But all of a sudden, for reasons I still don't understand, you--"

"Yeah, honey, I see." Ken's fists were clenched, his knuckles white. "God, I'm sorry."

"Kenny, what did I do? I didn't mean to--"

"I know," he cut in. He was silent for a long moment. "Look, I can't explain too well, because...well, anyway, I've been sort of hiding, too. Since I came back from the war. While I was over there, I saw...I was...I mean I...." He stopped and looked at her helplessly, trying to explain a change that he couldn't understand himself. "Well, seems everybody I know either feels sorry for me, or doesn't trust me, or is afraid of me. Sandy tries real hard, but she ain't let me alone all my life, an' now she's after me all the time, worryin'. When you showed up, it was different. You didn't know anything about all that; you didn't care about it. It was just like when we were kids, real easy and--well, but then you knew. I--" He jumped suddenly to his feet. "Look, I'm real sorry. About everything." He started for the door.

"Wait!" Annie jumped up and followed him, grabbed his arm with both hands. "Where are you going?"

"Back home. You've got plenty of troubles without me hanging around."

"But I thought we were friends again." Annie could see the pain in his darting eyes and knew she had to defuse it somehow or lose him again. "Kenny, it ought not to matter! How can it? Except that there's more understanding between us now. Besides, if you leave again, how am I ever going to get this damn barn fixed?"

Ken glances at her, saw the corners of her mouth twitch and then surrender to a broad grin. Helplessly, he grinned back at her, turned back toward the stall.

"You know," he began, "I'm gonna have to work for a week and a day just undoing this kid's stuff of yours. You've got to learn how to use that hammer I got you--a lot of this is gonna have to come right back down again." Hands in pockets, Ken gave the nearest of Annie's partitions a solid kick. It stood firm.

"You see!" Annie exclaimed, rising cheerfully to his bait. "I'm doing just fine! Good as you!"

"Hell you are. Look at this," he gestured in mock disgust. "I bet half those nails are angled up and not down, way they's s'posed to be."

"Prove it!" Annie demanded.

"I will!"

* * *

The Queen of Diamonds let you down; she was just an empty fable.
The Queen of Hearts you say you've never met.
Your twisted fate has found you out, and it's finally turned the tables--
Sold your dreams and paid you with regrets...

"Well, Kenny, did you like it?"

"Oh, yeah!" he responded enthusiastically. "But I don't understand a few things."

Ken and Annie stood together in the late afternoon sun in front of the old Paramount Theater, allowing their eyes to adjust to the light and their bodies to warm up after two and a half hours in the chill air conditioning. They had driven into Sedalia to mail a package off to Annie's publisher and pick up groceries and some things for the house, and after some determined persuasion, Annie had talked Ken into completing their afternoon with a movie when she'd discovered *CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND* on the theater marquee.

"What don't you understand?" she asked him.

Ken frowned. "Well, that French guy, for starters. He sure trusted those aliens, invitin' them down like that. He just took for granted that they'd be friendly. He set that whole project up for an ambush and just lucked out, that's all. What if those little guys had wanted to blow the whole thing away?"

Annie chuckled. "There are lots of movies where that happens. But the director wanted to tell about aliens as good guys, and prove different cultures don't always fight over their differences." Ken snorted, and Annie smiled wryly. "Sometimes differences can be advantageous to both sides."

"But what about Neary's wife and kids, and that other woman, the blonde? He just walked away from them."

"I think that Neary loved his family, and they loved him, but they didn't understand each other. There was no foundation for the love to build on. Without understanding, love has a hard time growing." *Look at us,* she thought.

"I guess I can see that," Ken replied thoughtfully, "but I still wouldn't have gone off like that with a bunch of little guys I couldn't even talk to. My favorite part was the spaceships. They were great! Fantastic!"

"Oh, yes!" she agreed. "I really like the first time we get to see them up close, coming around the corner on the mountain road."

"Yeah, and when they go through that toll gate. Would've like to try that stunt myself!"

"Kenny!"

"Sure thing! Surprised the shit out of that tollman, didn't they!"

They both laughed and began to walk to the corner when voices hailed Ken from behind. Annie sensed him tense up beside her and he pretended not to hear his name, but continued down the street.

"Hey, Boyd!"

"Yeah, soldier boy!"

"Kenny," Annie said, "someone's calling you."

"Ain't nobody I need to see. Keep walkin'."

"But Kenny--"

"Boyd, dammit, wait up!" A pair of shadows overtook them, and Ken and Annie turned to face Frank Ives and Artie Williams. Ken cringed. He'd gone through school with Frank and Artie, and competed against them on almost every boyhood battleground from football to 4-H to females. Their rivalry had carried over into circle-tracking; Frank and Artie had been quick to sense the change in Ken after his return from service, and they had revelled in tormenting him, extracting revenge for scores of adolescent defeats. Ken knew that this time would be worse than past encounters, because the harrassment would be extended to Annie. Something in his chest tightened with his certainty that he would be powerless to stop it.

"Well, boy, ain't seen you at the track in a long time!" baited Frank. "Finally learned your lesson? Or you got your friend drivin' for you now? He ain't much, but he's a sight better than you ever were--at least he can get the car on the track!"

"I got better things to do than go round in circles every Saturday," Ken snapped back. He took Annie's elbow and began to move her away. She winced at the tightness of his grip.

"Oh, really?" said Artie with a sneer. "Such as? I ain't seen your car at all 'round town. Did you wreck it, or finally trade it in on some rabbits?" He stepped in front of Ken, blocking his path. Ken's shoulders stiffened and his arms went rigid at his sides. A flash of worry raced through Annie.

"Hey, maybe she has something to do with what Boyd's been up to, Artie," leered Frank, eyeing Annie in a way that made her move closer to Ken. "I guess he's goin' 'round in circles with her, now. That right, honey?"

Annie frowned. "I don't know who you are, but you're rude and I think you had better move on." She could hear Ken beginning to breathe faster, saw his face go white and tight-lipped. But he said nothing, and Annie grew frightened.

Frank smiled nastily. "How 'bout it, soldier boy?" crowed Artie. "How'd a rabbit-raising loser like you end up with a pretty little thing like her?"

"I'm not a thing!" snapped Annie. "And none of this is any of your business. Now go away and leave us alone!" Anger began to mix with her fear and she looked to Ken, waiting for him to do something. But his helplessness was evident in his eyes and he had stepped backward, away from their two tormenters. People in line in front of the theater were watching by now.

"Come on, sweetheart," coaxed Frank. "Why don't you come along with us? You're wasting your time with Boyd, here, believe me. Kenny won't never do nothing but spin his wheels." He reached out for Annie's arm.

It happened so fast that Annie had barely begun to shrink away from Frank's touch when his hand was torn from her arm by Ken. One swift blow and Frank was sitting on the hot cement of the sidewalk, blood running from his nose. He looked up at Ken with an expression only slightly less astonished than Ken's own.

"Hey, you can't do that!" yelled Artie, moving on Ken. But Ken's face was that of a child discovering a new ability, and with a growing smile, he neatly sat Artie down next to Frank.

"Now, get the hell out of here!" Ken said firmly. "And if I ever hear of you two saying anything other than 'good morning' to my lady here, you'll be talking through a split lip for a week after. And that's a promise!"

A smattering of applause broke out from the people waiting in line in front of the theater box office and Ken and Annie turned around in surprise. Sheepishly, Ken grinned again. He reached out and slipped his arm through Annie's, guiding her back toward the street corner. His head was high, his back straight, and the adolescent clumsiness Annie had grown used to seemed to have fallen away from him. Although she was a bit scandalized at being the cause of fisticuffs on the main street of Sedalia, Annie sensed that he had just won a personal victory over some unknown fear and she couldn't disguise her smile.

"Kenny, you were wonderful!" she praised him, quite pleased with the feel of his arm linked with hers. "Who were those two, anyway?"

Ken smiled a bit grimly, and then laughed out loud with genuine happiness.

"Those, kid, were a couple of my old 'friends.' But they ain't gonna be a problem no more. Forget 'em." He drew her closer as they began to cross Howell Boulevard. "Now watch this street; the traffic's heavy."

* * *

Later that evening Ken and Annie sat together before their first fire of the fall. Annie sat on a low ottoman pulled up close to the hearth, while Ken sprawled on the floor next to her with the kitten Jenny curled in her favorite place, on his stomach. The dishes from their dinner had been cleared away and now they were sharing a smoke and a bottle of burgundy, but not their individual contemplations.

Annie was enjoying an uneasy happiness. The strangely symbiotic friendship between Ken and herself had long ago grown to be more than just friendship to her.

WE ARE NOT ALONE

Annie was amazed, and more than a little troubled, at the ease with which Ken had disarmed her defenses with his quiet, guileless manner. *I only wish I could do the same for him,* she thought, looking over at the tousled hair inches from her hand. Annie wondered, as she had many times since she'd known him, what he was thinking of. *The house is finished and I'm going to lose you now, aren't I?* she asked him silently. *You'll go back to that horrible little trailer and hide from life, just as I had planned to do. Now that I don't want that any more, how can I stand to watch you pursue it? Is it wrong for me to try to stop you?*

Annie looked down at Ken's reclining figure. His big hands were scratching Jenny's ears and stomach and the kitten was pushing her face into his cotton-clad chest in pure delight. Annie reached over and caressed Ken's head, running her fingers gently through his untidy hair.

I love you, Kenny, she thought.

Ken sighed and leaned his head back against Annie's leg. He rubbed against her hand as Jenny was rubbing against his own. Nice, he thought dizzily; so nice and warm and safe here. Not like the jungle had been, or the families' houses, or the trailer. Wish it would last forever. Annie's fingers brushed his forehead and then his cheek. Unthinking, Ken turned his head and kissed her palm. So soft, he thought. Not like my hands.

Sudden awareness struck through Ken's drug-eased mind; awareness of where he was and who and what he was. He turned his dizzy gaze to Jenny, carefully washing his fingers. It seemed to Ken that his hands were suddenly covered with dirt, oil and blood, grained into the skin as it had often been after days out on long-range patrol. Sweat broke out on his forehead. The kitten was doing her best to cleanse him of the grime, but there was so much of the stuff that Ken knew it would choke her if she continued. Ken felt his own throat and chest tighten, his breathing become strained. He saw Annie's hands, stroking his forehead, becoming covered in filth and the cozy room seemed smeared with it, thoughtlessly tracked in by him. The edges of his vision began to blur and Ken knew what his traitorous mind was about to do to him. Sometimes the nightmares wouldn't wait until he fell asleep. He had to get away.

Ken jerked his head from Annie's touch and dethroned an unhappy Jenny. Pulling himself to his feet, he reached for his cap to find that the kitten had beaten him to it. Carelessly, he poured her out of the crown and tugged the cap haphazardly on his head, as Jenny protested the unexpectedly rough eviction.

"Thanks for dinner," Ken managed to say to Annie's startled look. "It was really good. Ahh, I'd better be getting home now." *Fast, Boyd, fast before you can't find the door.* Already the room was spinning around him.

"But you hardly ate anything," Annie protested, rising to her feet. *Damn,* she thought, *I've done it again. How?* "Stay a little longer, Kenny. It's so cold there--outside, I mean. At least stay and finish your wine."

Ken shook his head, pulled his jacket from the back of a chair and thrashed clumsily into it. "I've got a long walk ahead of me, and you need to go to bed, honey," he replied, not looking at her. He moved toward the door.

Annie grasped his hand and looked up at him. She tried to keep her voice even. "Kenny, you know you don't have to go back to the trailer tonight if you don't want to."

Ken looked at her in disbelief. He squeezed her hand fiercely with both of his; for a moment his hazel eyes betrayed him too, and Annie could see longing and a spark of hope behind them. Then he turned his face away from her. "I gotta go," he muttered, "I can't stay any more." Dropping her hand abruptly, he shouldered past her, and before she could stop him, he was out the door.

Annie dashed after him out across the porch, down the steps and through the shadowed yard, catching up to him at the gate. She reached for his arm. "Kenny, wait..." But with a shrug of his shoulders, he eluded her.

Annie leaned against the gatepost long after Ken had disappeared from view, shivering and staring after him into the darkness.

* * *

Is there gonna be anything left?
Only stardust....

The heavy gray clouds that had hung low in the late December sky all day made it seem near nightfall, although it was in reality only midafternoon. Inside the tiny trailer, the table, couches and foldaway bed were layered in darkness. The trailer looked and felt empty, and only the quiet 'snick, snick' sound coming from one corner betrayed Ken's presence.

He was engaged in a task that he loved. Long, tapered fingers caressed each brass-jacketed cylinder as he carefully fitted the nine-millimeter bullets one by one into the steel casing of the clip to his M-16. Ken knew how to assemble or disassemble, load or unload, and how to shoot the automatic rifle in total darkness. Many long nights in cold wet foxholes the Worm Squad had spent hours holed up against the terror of the jungle night, Charlie's night, wordlessly toying with their weapons. Cold metal parts interlocked perfectly into a solid friend that eased some of the tension with the knowledge of its efficiency. Some nights when Ken couldn't sleep (or was afraid to) he would load and empty his clip for hours, feeling an echo of that silent comradeship, the security of his friends and their weapons. Other times only the shooting would help relieve the pressure of the destructive impulses that flared within him. Firing at the starry sky at least let him feel that he was keeping the enemy away.

Tension was coiled like a snake within him, and half a bottle of Jack Daniels (an early Christmas present to himself) had not eased it. Sandy was back home for a two-week holiday and was coming to dinner at her grandparents' that evening. Ken knew he was expected to show as well, and knew he wasn't going to. Sandy would ask him about Annie and Ken knew he wouldn't be able to explain. *Damn her anyway!* He slipped the last cartridge into the clip and hefted it in one calloused palm. If he didn't come to dinner, he was certain his cousin, with her damned cheerfulness and undivertable concern for him, would come searching. If she pressed him about Annie, he knew he would probably lose what control over himself he'd managed to maintain so far. Besides, Sandy was sure to mention the bottle on the table.

Scowling, Ken took a long swallow of the whiskey and capped the bottle. He stood and tugged his jacket on over his down vest and cotton shirt, jammed his cap crookedly on his head and slipped his old driving gloves on. The bottle he stuffed down in one of the deep pockets of the battered jacket, the clip in another. Lying on the kitchen table, wrapped in a canvas, lay the rifle; gently he unwrapped and lifted it, hefting its reassuring weight. His crooked smile flashed briefly across his face--this was one buddy he could depend on to stick with him and ask no questions.

Ken slung the rifle over his shoulder and opened the door to the trailer, allowing the chill wind to ruffle the fringes of his hair for a moment as he gazed about the yard. Bare branches rattled in the oak tree, scraping the roof of the trailer, and the sky looked low enough to touch. He saw the ridge rise up before him and started for the path leading to its crest. He wouldn't stay there long--Sandy would look for him there first. As he climbed through the broken fence at the bottom of the pasture, Ken thought about the previous Christmas. The tension in his chest gripped him tightly and he began the vigorous climb to the top of the hill, his knuckles white where they gripped the stock of his weapon. *That ain't gonna happen again,* he thought.

I ain't goin' up to the house this year--I ain't goin' anywhere near the family. I don't owe them to be there.

Ken's long legs carried him rapidly to the crest of the hill, and he stopped there in the fading light and pulled the bottle from his pocket. Gloved hands twisted the top off and another deep swallow seemed to put the cold at bay for a moment. *Gonna sleet tonight,* he thought as he slipped the whiskey back into his jacket. *Maybe the kid won't come up here after all.* The fallen log he'd sat on that last Christmas Eve was still there and he lay the rifle down against it, turning to survey the surrounding countryside. Smoke came from his grandparents' chimney and also from the other side of the ridge. Annie's house. Warm, brightly lit, secure, with Annie and Jenny probably sitting together by the fire. Music would be playing low and the couches would be spread with Annie's afghans. She would be sketching, or reading, or playing her guitar, or just stroking the cat and watching the fire the way they had spent so many other evenings together. Ken tried to ignore the hollow feeling that gripped him at the thought of that house. He wondered momentarily if Annie missed him at all. Abruptly he discarded the thought and the sight of the smoke with a fierce determination not to be touched by old, useless memories. His reality was grounded in his own mind and his future lay with no one else. The rifle promised a safe release. Ken sat down on the log and picked up the weapon, pulling the clip from his pocket and slipping it into the chamber with a sure and natural motion.

The cold was fierce. Even as he lowered the loaded gun to the ground and leaned it against the tree, reaching again for his bottle, several drops of sleet spattered against his cap and the broad shoulders of his jacket. Ken drained the last of the Jack Daniels with four quick gulps and pitched the bottle far away over the edge of the cliff, listening in the muffled silence for the tinkle of broken glass far below him. The ice began to fall more heavily. Ken stared up at the dead sky laced over with leafless branches of the few trees nearby, holding his rifle and wondering what to shoot at. There were no stars to aim for tonight, and it was less satisfying to confine his target practice to tree trunks and bushes. Those were targets for kids with BB guns. Ken's was a weapon that had been designed by the best minds available with its sole purpose being to kill. It fulfilled that purpose well, Ken knew from experience. His gloved hands smoothed the thick barrel. Suddenly he pointed the muzzle at the sky and let off a burst of fire. The echoes of his attack rattled around the trees and rocks and died away, leaving half the clip gone and Ken still choked on his own frustration. Lately the shooting helped less and less, and he knew that he'd have to find some other way to make his peace with himself. If he could.

Suddenly despair swelled within him, and unacknowledged tears began to mix with the frozen rain on his cheeks. Ken closed his eyes and gripped the rifle as if it were a rope upon which his life depended. Against his eyelids his future stretched away before him, desolate as the countryside that even now was fading in darkness and sheets of falling ice. Ken was bitterly aware that he'd been offered life and run away from it more than once in the last five years. First Beth and his grandparents, then Jack, then Sandy, and finally Annie. One by one he'd turned away from them, alienated them. Now the weapon he held in his shaking hands was the only thing left him. *Some kind of man I am,* he thought angrily; *some real hero. Can't even face a race track or help family or friends, or love a woman. What the hell else is there?* And he knew the answer was--nothing. Why he should continue from day to empty

day was a mystery to him. *Maybe,* Ken thought idly, *I should use the rifle for its real purpose once more. Just once more.*

He warmed to the idea. *Yeah, just one quick burst;* empty the clip into his head just up under his ear. He remembered a buddy in 'Nam who'd done it, and the mess he'd left behind. *Not here,* Ken thought. *Sandy'd find me here and she shouldn't have to carry that memory around. No, if I go back in the trees far enough, with this storm blowing in tonight, they'll have a hell of a time finding me before the spring thaw.*

Standing quickly, rifle in hand, he turned back toward the deeper woods behind him. His boots made a sticky sound on the wet leaves as he walked rapidly and aimlessly through the trees. His vision was fogged by liquor and the darkness that had finally fallen, and he felt a sudden jolt as his shoulder connected hard with the twisted bole of an old pine. The rifle was knocked from his hand. Ken recovered it and hurried on, not noticing in his blind rush that the ground was falling away beneath his feet. His tears were gone now, and only the choking sound of his panting betrayed his weeping as he walked.

Unseen, a fallen limb tripped him and Ken fell heavily to the ground, his breath knocked from him. His brain spun wildly for a moment before he could right himself. The rifle was still clenched in his fist, but his cap was askew and his back was wet from sleet and moist leaves that had fallen down between

his jacket and skin. Shivering, he shrugged in his damp clothes to free the refuse and leaned back against the tree trunk, panting and dizzy. With bleary eyes, he looked around him.

Yeah, this is good, he decided; *this'll do just fine. Sandy won't find me, and neither will anyone else who comes looking before April.* For a moment Ken thought about Sandy with regret. *Kid, don't hold it against me,* he asked silently. *You don't really need me any more; haven't for a long time now. You're doin' just fine on your own. I'm sorry I'm gonna make you cry, but it'll be the last time I do.*

Suddenly the last night at Annie's house filled his thoughts, as it often had over the past few months. Ken felt a wave of shame and anger at himself sweep over him. His grandparents had each other, and Sandy had her family and her future, but Annie would be alone now. *Aw, honey,* Ken thought, *I'm really sorry about that. I shoulda known I'd hurt you, too. But bless you for tryin'.*

Blinking back the hot tears once more, Ken brought the rifle up and ran the tip of his gloved finger down the barrel, guiding it over the jacket collar and resting the muzzle lightly against the ice-numbed skin of his neck just behind his left ear. His left palm cradled the stock, bracing it with his drawn-up knee against the recoil. His right thumb slipped through the trigger guard and rested gently on the small metal part.

Easy, thought Ken. *So easy.*

Then he heard a voice through the trees, and dimly recognized his name.

"Kenny! Kenny!" Ken opened his eyes. "Kenny! Come home!"

He lifted his hand from the trigger of the rifle to wipe his face with his dripping sleeve. His nose felt numb and his fingers were growing stiff within his gloves. *Go home?* thought Ken. *Yeah, I'd like to go home.* All the time he was in the jungle, all he'd ever wanted was to go home. How could he have known that it wouldn't be there when he got back?

"Kenny!" called the voice. Slowly he realized it was Annie calling his name. She wanted him to come back.

It's the whiskey, Ken thought bemusedly, *not really her.* Another chance was what he'd been wanting and fearing both since the night he'd left her, and now his mind was teasing him with the illusion of that chance. But if it wasn't real, why did her voice sound so clear?

Something within Ken seemed to turn with a pleasant pain, and he suddenly knew that he wanted that chance; wanted it badly enough to reach for even the ghost of it. A thrill of happiness tore through him, leaving him giddy, and with a wild motion, he threw the rifle away into the darkness; it glanced off a rock and fired a round before it dropped into a pile of damp leaves. Lurching to his feet, Ken started downhill toward Annie's voice. He staggered down the path, rendered slow and clumsy by the whiskey and the cold, but determined now that he knew where he was going. Breaking through the tangle of undergrowth Ken saw Annie's house before him; the perimeter fence he'd built was just a few feet away. Lights were blazing through the windows of the studio and spilling out into the darkness, and framed in the open door he could see

Annie waiting for him. Ken felt weak-kneed from fatigue and excitement, looking at her. He hadn't dreamed it. She was holding the door open for him.

As he started forward, a small dark shape flew past his feet and through the fence, across the dooryard and up onto the porch. "Jenny!" Ken heard Annie exclaim in welcome, and she bent and scooped the kitten up into her arms. He saw her gaze out across the yard again, and for a moment it seemed she was looking right at him. Then she turned away and closed the door. Ken slumped weakly against the fence.

Jenny. She'd been calling her kitten, and not him. It had been a dream after all, and Ken felt the sickening jolt he associated with waking from one of his nightmares. Only usually he was grateful to open his eyes; this time he would have given anything to be allowed to stay in the dream. His hands gripped the top rail of the fence and he buried his face in his arms, unable to move. The cruelty of the misunderstanding paralyzed him and he wept unchecked, oblivious to the icy rain melting on his bare neck.

* * *

Annie thumbed the switch of the heavy police-issue flashlight that Ken had given her months ago. A strong beam of light leapt from the lens, illuminating the dusty darkness of the pantry, and she smiled to herself at the feeling of security the light seemed to give. She walked through the house to the front door, paused there and placed the flashlight on a small table. Pulling her long robe tighter around her, she knotted the belt firmly, as if she was protecting herself with the action. Annie laughed silently; armed with a flashlight and a well-secured bathrobe, she was going out to do battle with the phantom in the blackberry bushes of her side yard.

While out calling Jenny, Annie had heard a rifle shot; when she let her kitten in, she had seen the dark shape moving by the gate and had known instantly who it must be. The entire time it had taken her to locate the flashlight, she had argued with herself about what she was going to do. Annie didn't really understand the conflicts that tore Ken. She had, from time to time, seen an old horror in his eyes, and had been moved by the sort of wild serenity he managed to maintain. She had also been frightened by it. *If it is Kenny out there,* Annie wondered, *should I let myself walk back into that trouble?*

She sighed. *Probably not. But watch me do it anyway.*

Annie opened the door and walked out onto the porch. The sleet was still falling hard and the bitter wind whipped her robe around her bare legs. Annie followed the fence line with the light until the beam shone on the blackberry hedge that had grown up over the gate that opened onto the path across the ridge. Yes, the bush was shaking ever so slightly; Annie could see a bulky shadow next to it, outside the yard. Her light revealed a blur of blue and gold and her heart jumped. Ken's head was resting on his arms and he was sagging heavily against the fence. The shot she'd heard flashed through her mind and Annie ran down the leaf-covered walk to the gate. Reaching Ken's side, she dropped the flashlight in the damp grass and touched his arm, reaching to turn his face to her.

"Kenny, are you all right?"

Lyborger '82

He tensed immediately and tried to pull back from her. The wet gloves flinched away when Annie tried to take his hands but she grasped them anyway and would not release him. "Kenny, please," she whispered, "Let me help."

Ken looked at her and his expression was bleak, his eyes tormented and barely focused on her. His gasping breath fogged the frigid air between their faces.

Annie tried to calm her voice. "You're soaking wet," she scolded him gently. "I've a fire going in the living room, and it's nice and warm. Come on inside. I'll fix you something hot and Jenny will wash your face." Annie squeezed his hands and looked into his eyes, pleading silently for him to see her. "Kenny, come home, won't you?"

Ken looked away from her, his face contorted and his shoulders rigid. Annie thought that she had failed. She let go of his hands; in spite of herself, defeat pressed the tears through her tightly shut eyes.

Then suddenly Ken reached for her, wrapping his arms so tightly around her that she couldn't breathe. He pressed his face into her hair and Annie could feel his ragged breath on her forehead. After a long moment, Ken relaxed his embrace and Annie leaned back in his arms, looking up at him. There might have been a hint of a smile in one corner of his crooked mouth. He nodded once.

* * *

The only light in the bedroom was that of the hurricane lamp flickering on the nightstand, the wick turned down low. Annie's rocker creaked in a slow, regular rhythm that matched the rise and fall of the blankets on the bed where Ken lay sleeping. She leaned forward and dropped the smoldering remains of her joint into the ashtray along with the others that evidenced her long watch. Dying smoke spiralled lazily to the high ceiling and hung suspended there, barely discernable in the dimness; the fragrance of the burning herb sweetened the air of the room. Sighing, Annie leaned back in her chair and pulled her afghan tighter around her.

The break in the rhythm of her rocking caused Jenny's ears to twitch and the kitten stirred in her sleep, snuggling even closer up under Ken's chin. Ken in turn murmured something under his breath and shifted slightly, one hand falling free of the covers. Annie leaned forward again and replaced it under the warmth of the blankets. Another low mutter, and Ken and Jenny seemed to settle once more.

The clock read 4:00 a.m., and Annie could still hear the storm outside howling unabated. She had put Ken to bed immediately and pressed a cup of hot tea and honey on him, forcing him to down half of it before she allowed him to fall into a deep, yet restless, sleep. Now, she studied his shadowed face, relaxed in slumber, lids shut tight over his too-old eyes. Asleep Ken seemed years younger; almost innocent.

How many more times will you run away from me? Annie mused sadly. *More important, how close will you ever really be able to come? Will what you're able to share with me be enough? And will you have bad dreams forever?*

It's going to be very hard for both of us, she silently reminded him. *But remember what we did when we were kids, in the back of your grandfather's pickup truck at the drive-in movies? We laughed at all the fun parts, and held on to each other through the scary parts. That's what we'll have to do now, too, Kenny.*

Closing her eyes, Annie settled back in her rocker to wait for morning.

Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?
Come down from your fences, and open the gate.
It may be raining, but there's a rainbow above you;
You better let somebody love you, before it's too late.

EPILOGUE

It hadn't snowed yet, but Ken could feel it coming and he welcomed the promise of it with mixed emotions. California refugee Annie wanted a white Christmas, and Ken found himself half-hopeful that she would get her wish. But he knew the snow, once fallen, would linger long beyond Annie's pleasure in it.

The steam of his breath in the frigid air created a halo around his head as Ken stood on the ridge overlooking his grandparents' farm and his own tiny trailer. Christmas Eve was three days away and he had come searching for a tree for Annie. He'd left her house long before dawn; striking the big wooden farmer's match out in the hall so as not to wake her, he'd lit the gas heater in the bedroom and slipped out the kitchen door, leaving Annie sound asleep. Ken figured that by the time he returned with the perfect tree, he'd have earned his coffee, and probably a big breakfast too. Once he'd reached the ridge, though, the view of the Boyd farm had pushed the vision of the pine from his mind and memories of last year's holiday swept through him. Ken had been looking for a star that dark night, not a Christmas tree. And instead of an axe, he'd been carrying his gun.

Ken hefted the axe in his hand, eyes studying the steel beneath the battered leather blade protector. A weapon, but a tool as well. The M-16 no longer seemed a part of him as this simple utensil did. The rifle lay wrapped in canvas now, tucked far back in one of the storage drawers under his bed. After the long night on the hill, Ken had gone searching for it and carried it back to the trailer. He'd put back a six-pack throughout that afternoon and on into the night; cleaning the rifle, unloading the near-empty clip, staring at the smooth metal in the moonlight, considering. Finally, Ken had put the gun away. It had lain untouched in the two weeks since.

Smoke began to rise from his grandparents' chimney and Ken's eyes followed it into the pale gray-blue of the pre-dawn sky. His thoughts returned to the year before. Ken knew that he'd have to face the holiday with Uncle George and the rest of the family again this Christmas, but cold panic no longer took him at the thought. Although he was not looking forward to the weekend, he did not dread it either. Annie would be with him, and Sandy too. He could handle everything if they were around. He would manage. And there would always be Annie's place later; less the retreat that his trailer had been, than a haven where he could relax between forays into the world.

Ken smiled crookedly. His gloved hand picked absently at the rotting tree trunk, stripped a bit of bark from it and dropped it into the dead leaves at his feet. Long months ago he'd lain in wait here for the Christmas star. Scant weeks ago he'd sat on the same log and decided to turn his rifle on himself. Now the serenity of the place seeped inward, calming him, drawing him almost unaware into an artless introspection that he had shied from for years.

* * *

Frozen rain splashing heavily on the roof woke Ken from his restless sleep. He blinked his eyes in the muted light and looked blurredly at the ceiling and walls, trying to identify his surroundings. Annie's bedroom? The night before came back to him slowly as his gaze found the rocker pulled close to the bed, Annie's green and gold afghan rumpled around the sleeping kitten Jenny. Ken thought he'd seen Annie sitting there sometime during that long night, but he'd slipped back into his dreams without ever being certain that his vision was not one of them. Long slumber and the lingering effects of the emotional riot he'd endured and the Jack Daniels he'd downed the day before had left Ken numbed, and it wasn't until he tried to move that he realized Annie lay curled next to him beneath the blankets. Her head rested on his arm, her hand lay across his wrist, and her back pressed with a soft warmth against his ribs.

Ken froze, holding his breath, terrified of moving and waking her. Long dark hair had been thrown back in her sleep and tangled across his chest, stirring at his slightest exhalation. Finally, though, he had to breathe, and at his long sigh, Annie made a small sound, turned her face to him and blinked sleepily.

"You need to get up, don't you?" she murmured. "Here's your arm back." She shifted her head to the pillow and closed her eyes. "Come back. I won't be able to sleep again if you don't." In the next moment, she had dropped off once more.

Ken stood at the foot of the bed a few minutes later, staring at the shape beneath the blankets, his knuckles white as he gripped the bedpost. Fear lodged rock-hard in his heart. Climbing in next to Annie now would be harder than any fire zone jump he had ever made, and he knew there would be no retreat afterward. Tendons worked in his jaw and forearms. Small bursts of light exploded in his memory--how could he ever reconcile his past with Annie's offer to share the future? After the things his hands had done, how could he put them on her?

The chill of the room forced him to a decision. It was impossible for him to leave; after all that had happened, he knew that now. His feet carried him slowly forward. Drawing the covers back, Ken slipped into the bed again. He moved to Annie's side and carefully pulled her close, burying his face in her hair and drawing the scent of it deep into his nostrils.

Annie woke again at his touch. "You're freezing," she frowned, turning to face him. She found his hand and guided it to her face, placing his big palm against her cheek, then reached for the dog tags tangled in the soft hair of his chest.

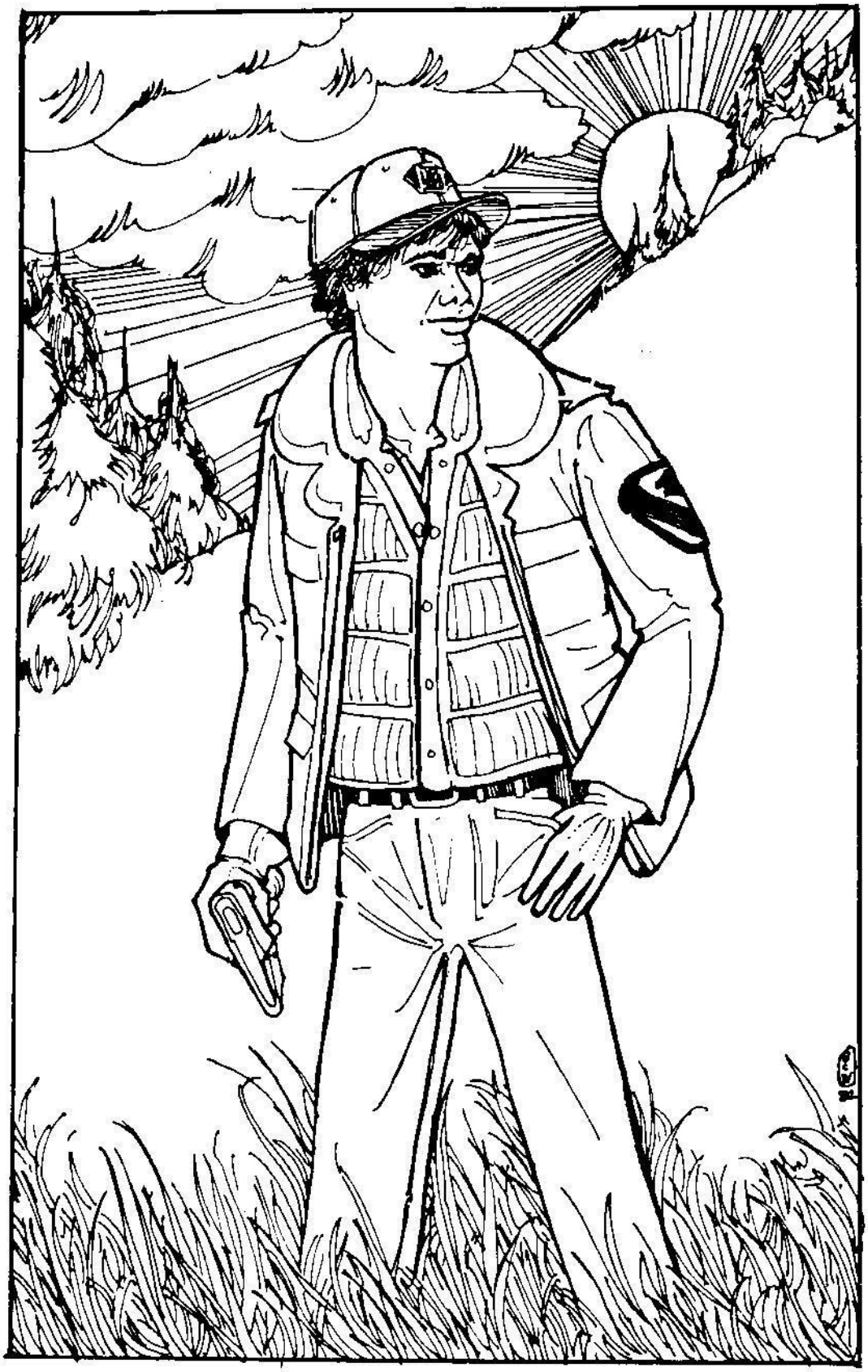
Ken's hand flew to her wrist, gripping it so fast and firm that Annie gasped in painful surprise. She turned wide eyes on him; slowly she leaned forward and kissed his rigid, bloodless fingers. They relaxed and withdrew. But both Ken and Annie saw the bracelet of red marks his hold had left.

Annie turned her attention back to the aluminum I.D. Ken had worn constantly since the day they were issued to him. Her slender fingers twisted in the chain, lifting the tags over his head, pulling them free and allowing them to slide to the hardwood floor. Ken flinched at the metallic sound of their impact. Annie pressed herself to his side, resting her smooth cheek against his scarred shoulder.

"Just you and me, Kenny. No past, no future."

Much later, they made slow, cautious love. Ken's hands trembled as he touched Annie; his self-consciousness conjured a fear of any misstep he might make that could cause him to displease her. Annie was unsure how to encourage Ken without alarming him. His gentle awkwardness brought tears to her eyes, and she nestled her face against his neck. Gradually Ken's hesitant passion and Annie's own carefully expressed pleasure in his lovemaking overcame his fears. Deepening shadows of appraoching nightfall found them clinging to each other in a comforting, if transitory, peace.

* * *



There had been nights since then that had not worked for them, and days when awkward moments seemed more common because of their new relationship. Twice Ken had disappeared to his trailer for a day or two, then walked back into Annie's kitchen as if he'd never been gone. His nights, whether spent with Annie or alone, were still haunted by nightmares. But somehow a serenity had grown between them that they both drew on for strength to deal with their individual memories.

The sun broke over the tallest of the pines on the ridge, and Ken felt the shoulders of his army jacket soak in the first mild warmth of the morning. Drawn from his reverie, he favored the Boyd farm with a lop-sided yet benign smile. Farther down the ridge, where the cliff relaxed to a more gentle slope and the southern exposure was unobstructed, there grew a stand of long-needled jack pines with full, even shapes. There Ken knew he'd be able to find a tree good enough for Annie's Christmas. The smell of her coffee seemed to fill his hostrils for a brief moment. Then a waft of fresh pine resin drove it away and Ken stood, stretched, hefted his axe and started down the hill.

ARCHEOLOGY

REFLECTIONS ON A MEDALLION

It hangs from my neck,
Just a weight on a chain.
Indiana Jones . . .
(I remember the pain.)

Five thousand dollars.
Well, that's something, all right.
Indiana Jones . . .
(Gonna be a long night.)

Funny inscription.
Wonder what it all means.
Indiana Jones . . .
(I was only fifteen.)

Come back tomorrow.
Yeah, go sweat for a while.
Indiana Jones . . .
(I was only a child.)

A bronze medallion
In the shape of the sun . . .
Damn it all, Indy,
Why the hell did you come?

Jacqueline Taero

THE DEMISE OF WILLIE BILL

(or JOURNEY TO INSOMNIA)

Listen, my friends,
and I will spill,
the amazing tale
of ole Willie Bill.

It began with a blurb
in my TV Guide,
that told me Willie
again would ride.

The Guide said it ran
from three until five,
but neglected to mention
he *didn't* survive.

I'd been told by friends
that this film was a turkey.
then, behold, the first shot
was *him* eating jerky.

I figured this flick
our boy could sure carry.
But by the time it had ended,
there'd been nary a Harry!

He stayed in the background;
his silence a record
(I think he was training
to play Richard Deckard).

The gang was all falling
like flies on the screen.
But the demise of Willie,
I hadn't yet seen.

So I waited and waited,
and waited some more.
The next thing I knew
it was four forty-four.

He hadn't shown in a while,
but I didn't see him go,
So he must be alive.
This much I did know.

He'd end as he'd started
astride his horse tall.
Then sadly they told me
he's dead, minnie ball.

What? I raged at the screen,
Willie Bill is gone?
I watched an extra hour;
he's not coming back on.

I couldn't believe it;
I'd wasted my night.
And I had to rise for work
by the dawn's early light.

No more late nights I swear,
but I'll start *that* next week.
I see in the Guide,
tonight is Hanover Street!

Marcia Brin

&

Melody Corbett

From the end of Jedi to the dawn of a New Republic . . .

AnOther Scheherazade

On the outer rim worlds the death of Luke Skywalker was regarded with more curiosity than sorrow.

"What I can't figure is what happened to the body...Give me another alaj, on the rocks...Just disappeared."

"It'll go down like some religious legend, a fairytale for the children, that's all."

"I don't think so, Beep. I saw Darth Vader once in person, at the Alliance/ Imperial HQ on Terth. There's something about him--"

"Nah...That stuff will zotz you, go easy...It's no concern of ours, anyway. A toast to his and her royalnesses, long may they stay out of our hair--"

"And here's to their heir."

* * *

Han turned suddenly, nearly knocking Threepio and his tray of drinks onto the carpet.

"Can't you learn to stay out of my way?"

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," said the droid vacuuming the debris into a small container. "Very sorry."

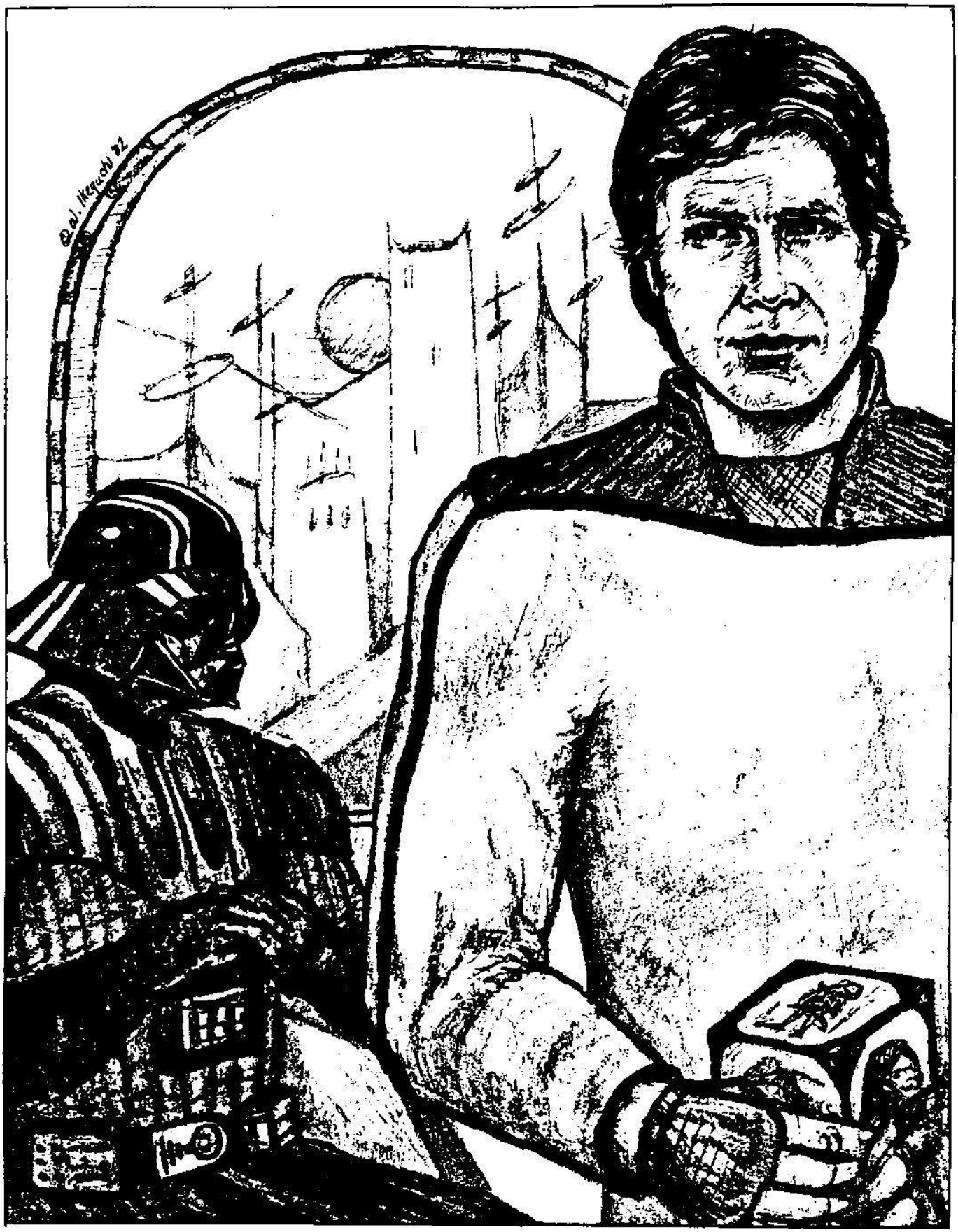
The Prince Consort shook his head. "Forget it." He gazed out the arched window onto the palace grounds below. "It doesn't matter."

Threepio stared briefly at the Corellian, photoreceptors scanning with puzzlement the human before him.

"That," said Han shortly without turning around, "will be all."

"Yes, sir." As he closed the door, the droid ventured to comment, "I'm sure she'll be fine, sir."

Han let the door close before he replied. "I wish only that were the problem, Threepio. Only that."



He watched the beings twelve stories below scurry about on their errands like wayward ants in search of a trail--busy, happy, oblivious. By the Force, no one is aware. No one is alert enough to see the danger. Leia, it happened once and it could happen again. Beware the corruption of power, the treachery of fame. Know that too many governments fall by their own hands and complacent peace often harbors the seeds of upheaval.

Han smiled grimly, the light of the setting Muaven sun illuminating his face in dying warmth. He had learned to walk among stars and to run with rebels. He had learned too much and now the old Solo was gone with the adolescence of passing rebellion. Now dreams lay shattered as glass strewn upon the field of honor, mocking shards, glinting in past glories. The new Solo paid dearly for the maturity of the office politique.

The door opened. Han knew him before he had crossed the threshold.

"Greetings, Lord Vader," whispered Solo tilting his head. "How nice of you to attend the christening."

Vader removed his cloak, but remained standing. "Yes, the pleasure is mine."

"Too bad Luke couldn't be here." Han crossed the room and took Vader's cloak. "Nice material. Knock over a Thsick colony?"

"I understand your nurturing a dislike for me, Your Highness," said Vader, seating himself by the window, "but I do not understand your requirement of my presence here."

"I just wanted you to see the child." Han picked up a holocube faceted with poses from Leia's pregnancy. "And know that I mean business when I say hands off. Her destiny is with me, with the mortal concerns of common beings."

"And not, I take it, with the spiritual concerns of the Force?" Vader studied the hurrying beings so far below him. "We have made a believer out of you, Han."

Solo strode to the window and gazed at the horizon, feeling light without warmth. "Yes. But the time for all that has passed." Han inhaled deeply and closed his eyes against the inevitable sunset. "Man is mortal--"

"And fallible." Vader rose and extended his hand for his cloak. "The difference is negligible."

* * *

Han cradled the newborn in his arms, cooing affectionately in a manner that surprised the Princess.

"You old softy." Leia smiled and sat up in bed. "You old tender-hearted sap of a daddy."

Han winked at her. "She's just a kid, Leia, like you and me."

"I deny that." Leia smoothed the soft hair on her baby's head. "She's much more. A new future. A hope."

Or a terror, thought Han as he wiped the dribble from his daughter's small face. Bright eyes shined back at him. A galaxy-rending terror.

Han felt the invisible hand on his shoulder, as he had so many times before, and heard the voice beyond hearing, young enough to care but old enough to die.

"The Force," it murmured to the child, "will be with you always."

STARTING AGAIN

Paula Truelove

David Halloran opened his eyes wide, startled by the incessant clanging of the alarm clock by his bunk. Reaching over, he turned it off and sat up to look about the barracks. The alarm, which read 5:00 a.m., had not awakened any of his fellow officers. Sighing, he laid back on the bunk, hands behind his head, and stared at the barren ceiling. A smile touched his lips as he thought about the day. It was the beginning of his well-earned, four-day pass. He'd lost track of all the missions he'd flown in the past three months.

After showering and dressing, he slipped out of the barracks just as Reveille was sounding over the base. As he made his way to Transportation, he turned up his overcoat collar against the thick early morning fog. Entering the drab grey building, he pulled papers from a coat pocket and handed them to the duty sergeant, who glanced at them and wrote something on his chart before looking up. Smiling, he recognized David. "Okay, Captain, everything's in order." Handing over a set of keys, he laughed, "Same one as always. No bribes this time, hey, Cap?"

David flashed him a wide grin, remembering the times in the past he'd bribed the man with different, hard-to-come-by items for the use of a jeep to get into London. "For old time's sake," Halloran laughed, as he brought a bottle of scotch from behind his back.

"Thank you, Captain." The duty sergeant shook his head approvingly as he studied the label of the bottle. "You enjoy your leave."

"I will, Sergeant." David picked up the papers, stuffed them into a coat pocket, and left the building to find the jeep.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon as he drove down the lonely, deserted road and the cool morning air hitting him in the face felt refreshing.

Margaret...Maggie...he had to see her. For three months he'd fought within himself whether he should try to see her again. But two weeks earlier he'd received his promotion, mostly due to the special recommendation Paul Sellinger had given him. He had to see Maggie, even if he said he'd only come to thank Paul, or see how he was doing.

By 8:00 a.m., he was far away from Windsor Field and parking the jeep just off Hanover Square. He sat looking around. In three months the place had changed, yet despite the bombings, these people rebuilt and went about their normal existances.

Leaving the jeep, he walked the short distance and stood, hands in pockets, looking up and down the already busy Hanover Street. The memories began to nag at him, stronger than ever. A doubledecker red bus honked at him, and he looked to find he was a bit too close to the edge. Giving the driver a half-wave, he crossed the street.

David found himself where he'd waited that second time for Maggie. It had escaped damage in the bombings and looked much the same. He sat down on the steps, fishing out his ever-present pack of cigarettes. An hour later, the lower steps littered with cigarette butts, Halloran was still sitting. Taking off his hat, he pushed a hand through his hair, and finally stood. He threw down the lit cigarette, ground it beneath his foot and then walked down the street.

He stopped s short distance down. The small restaurant he and Maggie had gone to was now a boarded-up shell of a building. Farther down the street he saw a small sign swaying in the breeze and upon closer investigation, he found a cafe somewhat similar in its quaintness. Entering, he located a vacant table in the corner and sat, with his hand under his chin as he surveyed the room. Couples were seated, sipping tea, eating biscuits, talking quietly. Most were in uniform, oblivious to the outside world. Startled out of his thoughts, he looked up to find a waitress beside him inquiring as to what would be his pleasure.

"Tea," Halloran said softly.

"Anythin' with that spot o' tea, deary?" she asked, writing on the small pad she took from her apron.

"No...thank you." He smiled slightly at her wide grin and she moved off to fill her order.

The doors to the small cafe swung open and a couple bustled in, removing their overcoats. They had David's full attention. The man was an American serviceman, the woman an English nurse. They were seated and instantly joined hands across the table.

The waitress returned with his order, placing the cup and pewter pot of tea before him. "If I can 'elp you with anythin' else, deary, 'ale me." Flashing the wide grin at him once again, she left, going to wait on the couple who were now staring lovingly into each other's eyes.

Slowly David poured the tea, watching the steam rise off the hot liquid. He laughed to himself. *Boiled water,* he thought as he brought the cup to his lips, taking a cautious sip. Finishing the tea David stood, threw a few coins on the table, and walked out into the early morning chill of Hanover Street.

* * *

The clock on Hanover Square chimed 11:00 a.m. Halloran sat on a bench in the nearby oval gardens watching some small children play, their nannies keeping a vigil close by. *Children...* He'd never given the subject much thought until he'd met Maggie. The future, and his life in general, had never seemed important to him until he'd found her. Sighing, he listened to their laughter and felt more alone than ever.

Voices interrupted his thoughts, and he looked up to find several young women passing. Talking, laughing, all three wore the uniform of the Hospital

Service Corps. His green eyes sparkled, a smile playing across his face as he looked at his watch. Eleven-thirty...Maggie would be at the hospital by now. He could see her there. Standing, he straightened his jacket and hat and moved off to his jeep, tipping his hat and smiling at the nannies as he passed.

* * *

The hustle and bustle of the noon time crowd heightened, and finally quieted, as David sat in the jeep. He was parked across from the old hospital, unaffected by it all. He'd been there for the better part of thirty minutes, watching people coming and going, remembering the last time he'd been there. Deciding it was time to quit stalling, he left the jeep and made his way across the street, pausing only slightly before pushing his way through the double doors.

The antiseptic smell was strong as he made his way down the narrow corridors, noticing how grossly overcrowded the wards were. Walking into Ward 4, he slowed his pace as he moved through the multitude of beds, looking closely at each nurse. Reaching the nurses' station, he looked back, surveying the large room...where was she?

"Can I help you, sir?" The young woman behind the desk smiled at him as he looked around.

"Ah...yeah...yes, ma'am. I'm looking for a nurse...Maggie...Margaret Sellinger," he paused, hope rising as he saw the look of recognition on her face. "Do you know where I can find her?"

She shook her head negatively. "I'm sorry...Margaret is no longer here."

The words hit him full force and his mind began to reel thinking the worst.

"Captain, are you all right?" Concerned, she came from behind the desk to stand at his side.

David looked down, trying to focus on her. "What happened?" His voice was a choked whisper.

"Margaret left two months ago. Her husband took an assignment with the United States government," pausing, she asked, "Was she a friend of yours?"

David shook his head absentmindedly, swaying. Maggie wasn't dead!

"Captain, maybe you should sit down." The young woman put an arm around his waist, and guided him to a nearby chair. She disappeared momentarily, but returned with a cup of water, offering it to him. He accepted and drank it all, crumpling the paper cup in his hand as he made a fist. "I'm really sorry...she was a good friend to me also. I have her State-side address if you'd like to write her," she smiled as she reached for a pen.

"No!" he choked out. "I've got to get out of here." Standing, a bit unsteady, he brushed passed her.

"Captain, please wait," she called as he ran out through the ward. Watching him, unable to leave her duty station, she walked back to the desk, and sat down

slowly. The mountain of work stared her in the face, but she could not shake the vision of the young man's haunted face and his reaction to the news of Margaret's departure.

"Caroline Welch, report to Nurse Fletcher," the intercom blared, jarring her out of her thoughts.

* * *

Halloran pushed the jeep to its governed capacity speed, unaware of his surroundings. Coming to an intersection, he looked up at the street sign,--Shaftesburg Avenue. He knew where he was. The bar...it was close. He jumped

out after parking the jeep, and walked passed the Windmill Theatre, glancing at the strippers' pictures on the shoddy establishment's walls. Crossing the street, he entered the bar.

The bartender looked him over as he walked in, then continued cleaning the bar. "Hey, Joe, what'll you have?" he asked not looking up.

"Bourbon on the rocks, and keep 'em coming," Halloran said, making his way to a lone table in the back. The drink was brought and David eyed it without enthusiasm. "Still haven't invented ice over here yet, huh?"

"Never, lad...would melt our warm loving 'earts."

Halloran took a sip and grimaced. "Tell you what, bring me the whole damn bottle."

The barkeep chuckled and obliged. "You celebrating, son?"

"Running...is more the word." Halloran tipped the small glass and swallowed the contents. Thirty minutes later, the bottle was empty and Halloran was determined to punish himself even further. "Hey...barkeep! Bring me a bottle of your finest scotch and make it fast!" His voice was raised to carry over the noise of an exciting darts game which was in progress.

The barkeep brought the bottle and stood watching the soldier as he filled the small glass. "Hey, Joe, that stuff's gonna eat up your insides. Why don't you call it a day and go back to the base?"

David looked up and grinned, seeing more than one barkeep before him. "Yes, Mother," his voice sarcastic. "I don't give a damn what happens to my insides." Picking up the glass, he drained it. The barkeep shook his head, then went back to his work.

Halloran had succeeded in polishing off half the scotch when a group of American servicemen entered the bar. United States Marines, making it obvious to all they were well on their way to being drunk. Most in the bar ignored their boasting...except Halloran.

"I'll out drink ya, ya jerk." David stood, swaying as he put a hand to the wall to keep from falling over.

"Ah...so flyboy thinks he can out drink me, huh? Barkeep! Set 'em up over at his table...we'll see." The young Marine staggered over to Halloran's table and took the seat across from him. The barkeep arrived with the liquor and glasses.

Halloran picked up the first shot glass. Closing his eyes tight, he threw his head back and swallowed the amber liquid in one gulp. His eyes, watering as he opened them, brought a scattering of laughter throughout the bar. David ignored it. The Marine quickly downed his first glass and waited for David to take his second.

Twenty minutes later, the bottle was empty. Halloran and the Marine each had one shot left. David gulped the contents of his glass, propping his chin in his hand to keep his head up. He'd never been this drunk in his life but he wasn't about to give into a smart-ass Marine.

The Marine picked up his drink and raised it to his lips. His eyes rolled; the smell was too much for him. He fell face forward onto the table, the liquor in his glass spilling.

An ear-splitting cheer went up from most of the patrons in the bar. The young Marine's friends went pale, handing over the cash to those who had bet on David. David watched as they gathered up their friend hastily and left.

Suddenly, David felt the room begin to spin, and his stomach rebelled. The bathroom--he had to find it. Trying to stand, he found his legs would not support him and he sank to the floor. The barkeep and another man came to his rescue, hauling him up. David looked at the man on his right. "I feel sick," he said pitifully.

Okay, lad, let's get you to the loo." Both men laughed, much too loud for David's aching head.

* * *

The door to the bar opened, and a young woman entered, looking around. She had reached for the door handle to leave, when she saw Halloran at the back table. He was slumped against the wall, his eyes closed. She walked over to the counter. The barkeep smiled and was about to speak but was silenced when she placed a finger to her lips. "Hello, Jock. How long has he been at it?" she whispered, indicating David.

"Most of the afternoon...done made himself sick. He's gonna have one 'ellava hangover. He a friend of yours, Missy?"

She smiled. "Sort of. We both share the loss of a mutual friend."

"Oh. Very sorry to hear that."

"No, Jock...the person moved," she said laughingly. "I should think we will be in need of some coffee." She started toward Halloran's table.

"But, Missy, our rations have not come in yet--we're out."

"Okay, tea then, and make it hot, Jock." She winked at the barkeep and walked over to the table. Sitting down in a chair, still unnoticed, she watched the Captain for a few minutes. His hair was a mess and still wet (no doubt from Jock having stuck his head under the faucet). His face was pale and his uniform was in disarray.

"Captain, are you still alive?" she asked, her voice quiet. There was no response for a few seconds, then David opened one eye to see who was speaking. "I checked almost every bar I could think of, and you're in the last one...," she paused, then added, "You look awful."

Halloran closed his eye and put a hand to his head. "Go 'way," he said hoarsely. "I don't need any company." Sighing heavily, he crossed his arms on the table and put his head down. Jock arrived with the tea and set it down. Halloran raised his head slowly, eyeing the teapot, then the girl and barkeep. "Who the hell is that for?"

"You," she smiled, amused.

"And if I refuse to drink it?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Then I'll sit on you while Missy 'ere pours it down you," Jock grinned down at the young man.

Seeing the determination on their faces, he knew arguing would be futile. Besides, he didn't have the energy. "Okay...okay...you win," he whispered wearily, accepting the tea cup the young woman pushed into his hand. It took a bit effort to sit up straight but after a few seconds, his head had quieted enough for him to concentrate on getting the cup to his lips. Taking the first sip, he made a face. The woman across from him broke into giggles. David gave her a sour look. "Do you have to laugh so loud?" he questioned, putting a hand to his head.

"Sorry, Captain. Drink the rest of your tea," she urged, reaching out to push the cup in his hand toward his mouth like he was a stubborn child. David made another face and drank the remaining tea. She refilled the cup and watched as he drank it down. Setting the cup on the table, he looked at her, his eyes wide.

"Captain, what is it?" she sounded worried.

"I...feel...sick," he choked out, putting a hand over his mouth.

The woman was up and at his side, pulling him to his feet and almost dragging him to the bathroom. She waited patiently outside. Looking far worse than when she had first found him, David finally came out. "Feel better, Captain?" she asked, as he leaned up against the wall.

"Yeah...and I ain't drinkin' no more of your damn tea," he stated as menacingly as his condition would allow.

"Right, Captain. You could use a bit of fresh air though. Come on, I'll see if I can find someone to drive you back to the base."

David shook his head. "No. I'm on a four-day leave. I got a jeep across the street and I can get to an inn by myself. So, why don't you go home or wherever you're supposed to be and leave me alone?" Pushing away from the wall, he found it hard to get his balance. He leaned back against it and sighed.

"Okay, Captain, fine. I was only trying to help. Good day," she said sharply and was gone.

David stood there for some time, his balance finally returning enough so he could make his way back to the table. Picking up his jacket, he fished some money out of his pocket and threw it on the table. He grabbed his hat and stumbled out of the bar, reaching the jeep after only falling twice. Feeling dizzy, he crawled into the back seat; stretching his feet over the side--and passed out.

Caroline Welch watched from the sidewalk.

* * *

The jeep had been an easy accomplishment for Caroline, thanks to her brother who'd taught her many things before his death. Pulling up before a big house, she parked close to the steps and disappeared inside only to return, flanked by a heavy-set, dark-haired man. Lifting David from the jeep, he threw the limp form over his shoulder and followed the girl into the house.

"Thanks, Bert. Sorry to trouble you."

"No bother, Caroline. If you need any help with him, just give me a call," the man smiled.

"He's harmless, Bert, just in need of a friend," she explained as she walked to the door with the man. Saying goodnight and promising to call if she needed anything, she moved back to the bedroom.

She stood looking at Halloran, sleeping soundly on her bed. She quietly took off his shoes, and pulled a blanket over him. From a nearby drawer, she took a blanket for herself, turned off the lamp and left the room making sure to leave the door slightly open.

* * *

Sometime later, David woke to find his head feeling as if it was stuffed with cotton. Opening his eyes, he looked around to see very unfamiliar surroundings. The first signs of early morning were coming through the window, giving off enough light to see a few of the items on a nearby dresser. He sighed, closing his eyes. "A woman's bedroom?" he whispered to himself. Carefully, he pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, his head protesting. Standing, he walked unsteadily over to the dresser and looked in the mirror. "Jesus, Halloran, you look like shit!" He moved to the partially opened door and peered

out into the living area of his hostess--whomever it might be. Stepping out, he stood gazing about the large room. The furnishings were simple, rather worn, and the walls bare, except for a group of framed pictures above the fireplace. *Early English Poverty*, Halloran thought. It certainly was not what he'd been accustomed to in Chicago, before the war.

A sudden movement in the room gained his attention. He stood frozen to the spot, unable to breathe. Wherever he was, he was not alone. Someone, wrapped in a blanket, was asleep on the sofa.

Quietly making his way back into the bedroom, David eased the door shut. His head hurt badly, making it impossible to think straight. Moving to the bed, he knelt down to search for his shoes, every muscle in his body protesting. Shoes in hand, he grabbed his hat off a small table by the bed. A framed photograph caught his eye. Standing, he switched on the lamp and picked up the picture. Stunned, he sat down on the bed.

Maggie's smiling face stared at him from the small frame. A smile spread across his face as he gently touched the image, tracing over her eyes, nose, mouth. Remembering... A dog barking outside brought him back to the present and he looked closer at the photo. His stomach knotted up and he found it hard to swallow. It had been taken at the hospital and the woman who stood with Maggie now looked very familiar. Nothing was making any sense; his head was pounding relentlessly.

Replacing the picture and switching off the lamp, he picked up his shoes, placed the hat on his head, then moved to the door. He stopped short of opening it. Slowly he turned to look back across the room at the photo. It was shadowed, but he now knew why Maggie's companion looked so familiar. She was the one who had found him in the bar. He must have passed out. She was the person asleep in the next room.

David found himself short of breath and the pain in his head intensified. "You're panicking, Halloran. Breathe deep," he whispered aloud. Suddenly he felt very foolish. He was an Air Force bomber pilot, not some teenager caught in the back seat of a car, necking! "I gotta get outta here...right? Right! Jeez, now I'm talking to myself," he sighed. Opening the door carefully, he prayed she was still asleep.

Finding the living area as he had left it, he eased out the door, inching slowly toward the front entrance, glancing frequently at the sleeping figure. However, upon reaching the door, he found it locked. He studied the unfamiliar lock for a few moments and was finally able to unlock it. Opening the door, he checked the hallway; it was empty. He tiptoed out, easing the door shut behind him. He checked his watch. *Five-fifteen in the morning; no inns would be open yet*, he thought. At present, though, he could not worry about that. He had to get away from this place, this person who brought the memories of Maggie.

An unexpected wave of dizzyness swept over him and he leaned back against the door for support. The latch had not caught upon shutting and his weight caused the door to fly open. His balance, not at its best, failed him. He went down with a loud grunt. The door bounced against the wall, bringing a resounding thud throughout the apartment.

"Who's there?" a groggy voice inquired.

David was on his feet, grabbing his shoes and hat. Slamming the door, he raced off down the hallway, out the main entrance, and fled to his jeep. Reaching for the key to unlock the steering wheel, he found it missing. A frantic search of his pockets proved useless. "Shit," he whispered defeatedly, putting his head down on the steering wheel.

"I don't think you'll get very far without these." Halloran looked up to see Caroline standing at the top of the steps, keys dangling from one finger. David shrugged, put his head back down and sighed. "Why not come back in? It's a bit chilly out here," she offered, pulling closer the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. David straightened, slowly getting out of the jeep. He shivered as his feet touched the ground, realizing he was still in his socks. Reaching into the back seat, he retrieved his shoes and climbed the steps, passing Caroline without a word.

Following him, she stopped momentarily to assure a concerned Bert everything was fine. Walking into the flat, she found Halloran sitting in a chair by the fireplace. She shed the blanket, slipped on a robe that lay nearby, and moved to

the hearth. Before too long, she had a warm fire blazing. Looking up, she found her quiet companion staring into the flames, his face ashen white, his eyes tired.

"Captain, when was the last time you ate?" David shrugged his shoulders, looking down at his hands. "That's what I thought. Why don't I fix a pot of tea and then we can talk." Caroline watched him for awhile longer as he resumed his staring into the flames. She wanted to help but wasn't sure what she could do. Setting the fireguard in place, she left the room.

She returned a short while later. She found David standing across the room, hands shoved into pockets, looking out the window. Putting the tray on the small table, she sat, pouring the steaming tea from the china pot into the cups. "Tea, Captain?" she asked, not sure if he had heard her enter. Turning to look at her, he smiled slightly, and ambled over to the chair, taking the cup she offered. Extending the plate of biscuits toward him, she suppressed a giggle as she caught the sour look which flickered over his face. He took one, sniffed at it and took a bite. "I decided something light was in order," she stated, attempting to break the silence.

"They're very good. Thank you," he muttered, sipping at the tea.

Fifteen minutes passed in silence. David downed three more biscuits and another cup of tea. Placing his empty cup on the tray and wiping his mouth with the dainty napkin, he cleared his throat. "I really appreciate everything, Miss...," he stopped, realizing he didn't know her name.

"Welch...Caroline," she supplied.

"Yes, Miss Welch," he began, but she interrupted.

"Caroline, Captain," she told him, a bit irritated.

"Caroline. I really have to go. Could I please have the keys to my jeep?" For the first time, his eyes met hers.

"Of course, Captain." She reached into the pocket of her robe, but hesitated. "Captain, you're in no shape to drive. You're welcome to stay here today and rest. I have to be at the hospital in an hour, so there would be no disturbances."

"Thank you, but I have to go. The keys, please." He held out his hand. She tossed him the keys and watched as he put his shoes on. Standing, he pulled a few coins from his pocket and depositing them on the tray, walked out the door.

Caroline looked at the coins, not sure if she should be angry or not. Choosing to forget the entire incident, as well as the man, she removed the tray and went to the bedroom to dress. Not wanting to leave the bed in disarray, she began straightening the blankets. It was then she noticed the olive green duffle bag lying on the chair. Walking over, she picked it up. "You'll be back, Captain," she whispered, putting the bag into the closet. Finishing her chores, she left for work.

* * *

Caroline approached the checkout desk listening as her two friends chatted about how each day seemed to get longer. Smiling at the heavy-set woman who

signed them out, she stopped as a nurse from the ward called out to one of her friends and ran the length between them to give her a note.

"What does it say?" the taller girl asked curiously.

"Ah...it's from that cute American soldier they brought in earlier this week...says he loves me." They both giggled. Caroline closed her eyes, massaging the back of her neck. "Caroline, are you coming?" the girl with the note asked, irritated.

Caroline opened her eyes realizing she had been spoken to. "Oh...yes, I'm sorry. Guess I'm just tired," she said apologetically, catching up with them.

Once outside they found evening setting in, a light rain was falling. Caroline said good-bye to her friends and pulling her overcoat closer, she ran across the street to catch a bus which had just pulled to a stop. Her bus ride was a short one and it was no longer raining as Caroline got off at her stop. She waved to the elderly lady she had been talking with, then crossing the street, she began the short two-block walk to her home. Welcoming the first sign of spring, she was enjoying the fresh smell the rain always seemed to leave. She rounded the corner to see the house and the sight was one she expected, yet a surprise all the same.

Sitting in front of the house was a military jeep. Its sole occupant sat huddled behind the wheel with his arms folded and head bowed. A slight smile touched her lips as she approached. "You're going to catch your death of cold out in this weather," she said quietly. Halloran's head came up, his eyes wide. "I'm sorry, Captain, I did not mean to startle you."

"I came to get my gear," he stated flatly.

"It's inside, Captain," she told him, then moved up the steps and into the house not even looking back to see if he was following. David entered the apartment as Caroline walked out of the bedroom. As she handed the duffle bag to him, their eyes met.

"I take it you've found lodgings?" she asked, knowing his answer.

David, his head down, mumbled a response and turned to go.

"Captain...wait," she blurted out. David stopped and turned. "It's getting late and the inns in this area don't serve dinner after six. You're welcome to stay; nothing special, just fish and chips..." she paused, waiting for his answer.

"Thank you...but I have to go." He turned and walked out.

Caroline went to the door calling after him, "You couldn't find an inn, could you?" David stopped but didn't turn. Caroline pushed, "Well?"

David finally turned, shrugging his shoulders. "No. Everything is full. Some sort of special holiday or something."

"Well, you can't sleep in that jeep. Come back in." She waited until he took the first step, then ducked back in, closing the door behind him.

He turned to look at her, his eyes guarded. "Are you asking me to sleep here?" He tossed the duffle bag onto a nearby chair.

"Yes." Her voice was quiet, not sure of the look which had come into his eyes. David moved to stand before her, his eyes holding hers. "Captain, are you all right?" she asked, suddenly feeling scared.

David reached up, running his fingers over her cheek. "I need you," his voice was low.

Caroline suddenly realized her offer of lodging had been misinterpreted. "No, Captain. Please don't..." Her words were cut short as Halloran suddenly pulled her to him, covering her mouth with his. She tried pushing away but he only tightened his grip. The kiss became harsh. Gathering all the strength she possessed, she pushed him away. As she glared at him, tears streamed down her cheeks. "Damn you!" was all she could choke out.

"You asked me to stay. I thought..."

"You thought I wanted you to sleep with me?" she shouted.

David took up a defensive glare. "Now just one minute, sweetheart, how was I to know?"

Caroline's temper got the better of her and she wanted to hurt him. "You had to prove yourself, didn't you? Maggie left you so you had to find out if you still had your hot-shot reputation." The color left his face; the sadness in his eyes evident. She instantly regretted saying what she had. "Captain,... I'm sorry," were the only words she could find to say.

David slowly moved to sit in a chair by the fireplace. Caroline sat down in front of him, not knowing what to say. After a few minutes of silence, David looked over at her. "You knew of Maggie and I?" Caroline only nodded her head that she did. "How?" David asked, hoping it had not been Maggie who told her.

"I saw you two together in the hospital corridor."

"Then Maggie didn't tell you?" he asked, relief sounding in his voice.

"No, I sort of put it together. Maggie and I were close friends. Suddenly, she seemed to change and I couldn't understand why. This was before Paul went on that mission. Then, I saw you in the corridor that day. Maggie was crying when you left and...I knew."

"You called her Maggie?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, since the first day she and I began working together." David closed his eyes, leaning his head back. Caroline watched, no longer feeling any anger toward him. "I don't know about you, Captain, but I'm hungry. Please make yourself at home. I'll go fix us both some dinner." She stood and walked past his chair, only to be stopped as he reached out and grabbed her hand.

"I'm sorry, Caroline," he said quietly, his face somber.

Caroline smiled. "Maybe we should start all over again, Captain."

"Yeah. Friends, Caroline Welch? And stop calling me Captain. My name is David. David Halloran."

"Friends, David Halloran," she answered, disappearing into the kitchen.

David took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Yeah, David...a friend is what you need," he whispered aloud to himself. Getting out of the chair, he proceeded to build a fire in the fireplace. After a warm fire was blazing, he picked up his duffle bag and went into the washroom to freshen up as the smell of kipper drifted from the kitchen.

* * *

Caroline stood at the top of the steps. David was beside her as they watched Bert who was putting David's duffle bag into the jeep. He finished and joined them. Shaking hands with David, he wished him well and disappeared into the house.

David took her hand and looked down into her eyes. "Thanks, Caroline." He laughed, his eyes sparkling. "You're one hell of a card player, lady."

"I am, aren't I?"

"I'll have my revenge," he warned, teasingly. Then becoming serious, he added, "I will be back."

"I hope so," she spoke sincerely.

Leaning over, David kissed her lightly on the lips, winked, smiled and walked down the steps to the vehicle. Waving to her, he placed the hat on his head and drove away. Caroline stood watching as the jeep disappeared around the corner, a wistful smile touching her lips.

"He's a good lad," Bert said as he walked up behind Caroline placing an arm about her shoulders.

"Yes, Bert, he is. Now, I've got to get ready for work. I don't want to miss my bus." She smiled up at the man and together they walked into the house.

* * *

"You have a nice holiday, Caroline," the older lady cheerfully spoke to the young nurse.

Caroline pulled her coat from the small closet and slipped it on. "Just to get some rest will be enjoyable, Mrs. Miller." She felt as if she had fought a battle herself.

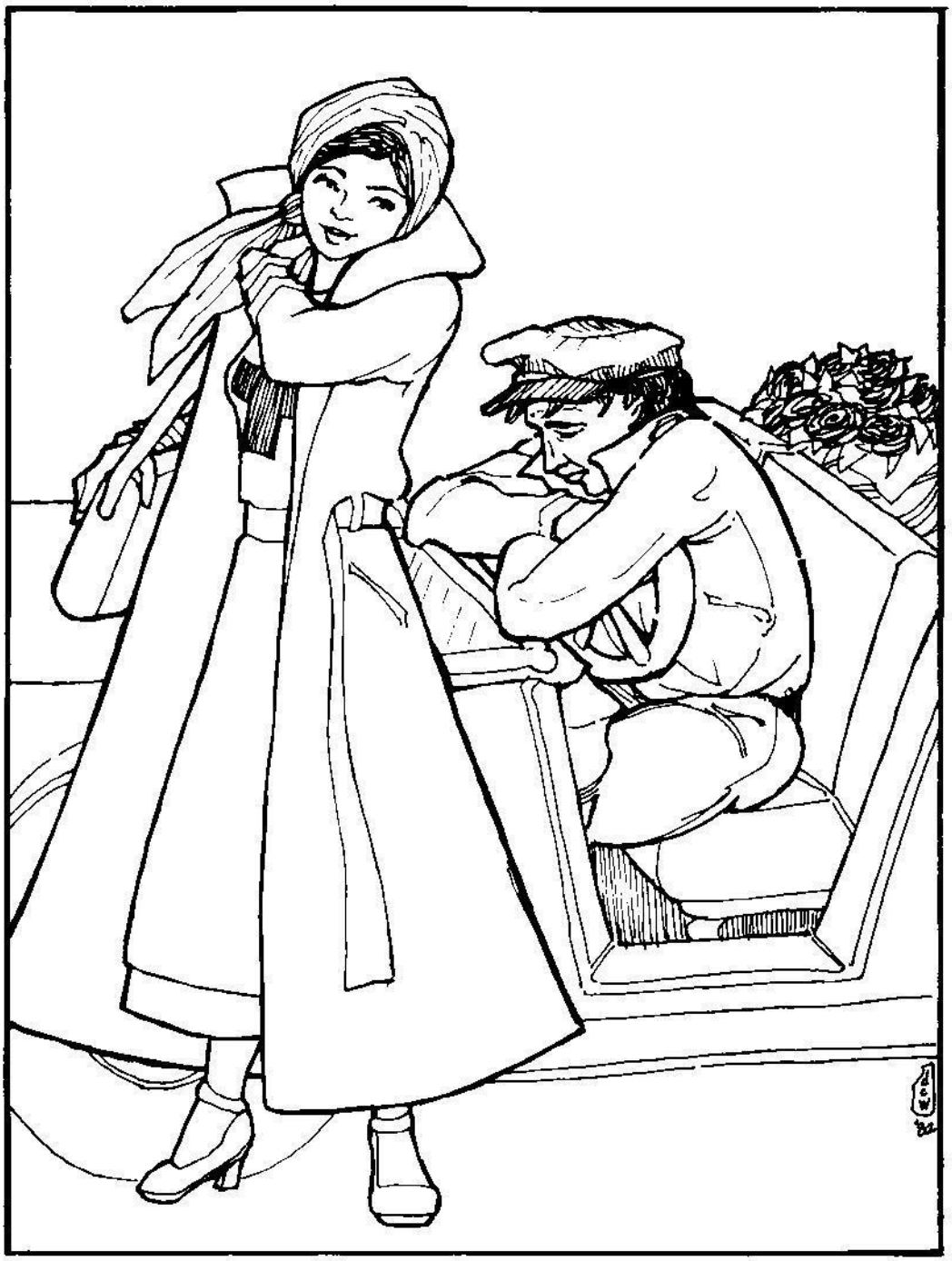
"Yes, we have all been rather overworked lately, what with a lot of the girls out sick and the overflow patients from Windsor Field." The lady finished,seating herself in the chair which Caroline had just vacated.

"Linda should be in soon to help you, Mrs. Miller, and you have the number where I can be reached if you need me."

"Yes, dear. I'm sure everything will be just fine. Now, go along and enjoy yourself." Her tone was motherly.

"See you on Monday," Caroline called, picking up her things and leaving.

She scanned the room noting with a nurse's eye the various patients. Some were sitting up reading, writing or talking. Others, those more seriously wounded, were lying still, and for a moment she wondered how many of the latter ones would be gone when she returned next week.



Coming to a stop by one bed she looked down at the still form. A stark white bandage covered his head and half his face. The young American, a victim of a crash landing, was the only one of his crew to survive. She thought back to the morning when she had heard an American pilot had been brought in, remembering the feeling of desperation as she rushed to find out who he was. And the relief which had flooded her when she realized it was not David.

David... A month had passed since she had waved good-bye to him from the steps of her house. In that time she had heard nothing from him. Thoughts which had plagued her before now returned. Would she ever see him again?

Taking a deep breath, she shook her head to clear it and moved out of the ward to the checkout desk. She chatted briefly with the duty nurse as she signed out. Walking to the door she looked out the window to find it cloudy, but not yet raining. She pulled up the collar of her coat, pushed open the door and walked out onto the busy street. Looking around for a bus, her eyes settled on a strangely familiar jeep parked just down from the hospital; the sole occupant was dozing behind the wheel. A smile spread across her face as she bounced down the steps and over to stand by the jeep. "Still sleeping in jeeps, Captain?"

David's head came up, a smile lighting his face. "Can you think of a better place?"

Caroline smiled. "You've got a holiday?" she asked, surprised.

David nodded his head. "Three days."

"Well, how nice. So do I and I'm willing to let you try and beat me at cards, Captain."

"Yeah, I'll bet you are," he said, laughing as he got out. Taking the things she carried, he helped her into the jeep. Jumping in behind the wheel, he looked over and found her staring at him, her eyes glistening with tears.

"I missed you," she said softly.

He produced a small bouquet of flowers from the back of the jeep and handed them to her. "I missed you, too," he smiled, as he reached to wipe away a tear with his fingers. He turned then and started the jeep. "Okay, Miss Welch, before we go to your place and you destroy me at cards, I'm gonna take you out on the town." With that, he put the jeep in gear, backed out and pulled into traffic.

* * *

"Starting Again" is the title of a song by Barry Manilow from the album "EVEN NOW."

DAEMON

"daemon (dē'· man) n. an inspiring influence; a divinity; a genius. -ic a. more than human; supernatural (Gk. daimon, spirit.)"

Archaeology.
It was always such a boring subject.
Until you came along
You breathed wonderful, pulsating life
Into the long-dead
Your enthusiasm is contagious--
No, it's infectious.
You have to be experienced to be believed.
Who ever heard of an archaeology professor
Carrying a bullwhip?
Usually they tend to be
Stuffy, bow-tied
Curmudgeons
That bury their noses in thick books
About civilizations long gone.
But you--
You are an anomaly.
Even your name sets you apart
From others.
Never have I seen so reverent a reaction
To a simple beam
Of light
(From God?)
You never gave up
Even when faced
With death.
Time and time again
The long-awaited and beloved prize
Was snatched from your grasp
By the suave Frenchman
By the boss German
By the little one who so loved to cackle.
(Are they laughing now?)
And you never--never--gave up.
Your resourcefulness
And respect for the powers beyond earthly realm
Saved your life
As well as Marion's
And left the future open
For more adventures.
Until you came along.
It was always such a boring subject.
Archaeology.

Ruth Radecki

Betsy Reed
©1991

DISCOVERY

Sherry Magee

The van lurched up the driveway and rocked to a halt in front of the McBride farmhouse. The engine cut off and in the sudden quiet, Ken Boyd pocketed the keys and began to gather the mail that had slipped from the seat onto the floor. He stepped out of the van, immediately aware of the rising wind, the rapping of an oak branch on the shingled roof. He looked up at the lightless windows and smokeless chimney feeling a vague sense of uneasiness. Shadows from the front porch reached out to embrace him as he ascended the steps and opened the screen door. The place seemed more than empty--almost abandoned. He shivered.

Should've stayed at the trailer, he thought. Gram had asked him to supper, but he'd begged off saying he had to feed the horses and Annie's cat. Now he wished he'd accepted the offer. Even the forced conviviality of a meal with his grandparents was preferable to this silence. *No help for it now.*

Just as his key turned in the lock a tabby bombshell exploded against his legs, knocking him off balance.

"Hey!" He glared at the bundle of striped fur and tail tangling itself around his feet. The half-grown kitten mewed anxiously while attempting to rub her face on his work boots.

"Why don't you watch where yur goin'?"

Ignoring his tone of voice, she sprawled onto her back and rolled over coyly. Her purr was loud and thready.

"Crazy animal," he mumbled, softening his glare. The toe of his boot gently prodded her tummy. "Not used to havin' both of us gone, are ya?"

A paw batted his bootlace.

"Well, that won't work with me. Let Annie spoil ya. Where I come from, cats sleep in the barn."

He wedged himself inside the screen, turned the key and succeeded in getting inside without her. When he turned from depositing the mail on a table, intending to close the front door, he found himself eyeball to eyeball with the tabby. She had climbed the screen, golden eyes wide, meowing for entry.

"Cut it out, Jenny!" Ken shook the screen door and succeeded in loosening her hold. The kitten tried to jump free, but a claw caught in the mesh. Her cries reflected panic as she dangled helplessly. Ken was around the door in an instant, supporting her body with his left hand while the right extracted her claw from the wire.

"Easy, easy," he soothed as Jenny favored him with additional cries of fright. "Yur all right. Nobody's gonna hurt ya." He stroked her, held her close to his chest until she quieted. Suddenly the kitten scrambled up his shirt to drape herself across his right shoulder. Ken could hear her purr, felt her whiskers tickle his ear as her head ducked against his cheek.

"Cut it out." He tried to squirm away. "Stop it, will ya?" But he was laughing. Claws pricked his back as her paws began to work in contentment.

"Screamin' one minute, purrin' the next. Yur one for the books, cat." He shook his head. "Probably want feedin', too. Well, horses first."

Draped over his shoulder, he carried her down to the barn where Britches, his cousin Sandy's buckskin mare, nickered a greeting. The sorrel, Sage King, sold to Annie the month before, crowded up the fence until the mare nipped him away.

"Stay out from under their feet, ya hear?" Ken put the kitten down, then pulled two cuts of hay from an open bale and dropped them on either end of the

lean-to in the corral. The horses stepped quickly, but without further quarreling, to their opposite corners. He walked around them for a moment, swatted Britches' rump, and paused to pull a twig out of King's tail. Satisfied that they were settled for the night, he checked the water in the trough before starting back to the house.

The wind had risen even more; storm clouds scudded across the sky as Ken looked up. It had been a wet spring.

"If you don't like Missouri weather, wait a minute," he mused over the old saying. "No stars tonight."

The first drop of rain hit his hand as he was half way to the porch. A steady patter droned on the roof as he reached the door. Jenny was sitting patiently in front of it.

"How'd you get here?" he growled. "I told ya, cats sleep in the barn."

She rose with lazy grace to rub his ankle. Hand on the door, he paused. "With my luck, you'll catch pneumonia, and Annie'll blame me."

The screen door opened, and the tabby led him in a beeline toward the kitchen. Her bowl was beside the refrigerator, and Ken poured milk into it, forked canned food onto a plate.

"Anything else you'd like?" Jenny sniffed the offerings suspiciously. "Why don't you go catch a mouse?" She ignored him, and settled down to eat.

There was ham in the fridge. Ken made himself two sandwiches which he took with a beer into the living room. It was chilly and cheerless in the gloom. He turned on lights, built a fire and sat on the couch to sort the mail. The letters were for Annie, but he thumbed through a new farm journal while he finished his meal and downed the beer.

Jenny scampered in from the kitchen in pursuit of a twist tie she'd found on the floor. Watching her caused Ken's mouth to quirk in a crooked smile. She feinted, spun, caught and tossed the toy with a dexterity to be envied by the Harlem Globetrotters. She kept the game up for several minutes before sitting down for a wash.

Suddenly, she stopped, head up, listening. Then she trotted into the studio where Annie did her painting. He could hear her meowing.

"She ain't here." Jenny's head reappeared in the doorway, golden eyes riveted on him. "I took her to the plane at noon. She'll be in San Francisco for a couple o' days."

The kitten cried again.

"Nope. It's just you an' me, kid. Shit, will you listen to me. I'm talkin' to a damn cat!"

Jenny hopped up on the couch beside him, but Ken rose and began to pace. One hand came up to rub the back of his neck. His back muscles ached from the work he'd completed on Pappy's pump that day, but it felt good. Hard work felt

good. Had Annie been there, he would have persuaded her to rub his back. Strange how he'd come to enjoy, even count on, that nightly ritual to complete his day.

He glanced at his watch, then at the telephone. The plane had landed in San Francisco several hours ago. Why had he told her not to bother to call? True, the phone bill was already high from her conversations with the West Coast, and she'd only be gone three days. Three days. It had sounded so short a time when Annie told him she would be flying out to work with her agent on the book she was to illustrate. It was the first trip she'd made since Ken had found his way to the house, drunk and half drowned, at Christmas. She had needed to go, he knew that, and had postponed the trip twice already because she was afraid to leave him alone. So he had worked hard to convince her he'd be all right alone--maybe too hard.

He was working on his second beer before the real fear in his mind surfaced. It was her first trip back to the coast in a year. All the friends she hadn't seen would be there, all the excitement of the life he felt she missed...what if she didn't come back? He shoved the thought aside, and, as he was learning to do when depression threatened, got busy. He headed for the bedroom to change his clothes.

The room was neat. Annie had picked up and made the bed before she left-Ken missed the friendly clutter of their things scattered over the furniture. There was an empty space in the closet where her clothes had been removed. He pulled out a clean flannel shirt and gave the door a hasty shove to shut out the sight. He'd feel better after a shower.

Dressed, NAPA cap on head and a fresh beer in hand, he made his way into the living room again to turn on the television. A few moments of flipping from channel to channel brought him only dissatisfaction, and he turned off the set. Silence. Ken rose, began to pace. Old horrors rose to nibble at the edges of his mind, and he desperately searched for something to keep them at bay. His eyes fell on Annie's guitar case leaning in a corner.

He didn't play often, though he owned a guitar that lay gathering dust beneath his bunk in the trailer. But Annie liked to sing and had gently coerced him into accompanying her. A few songs would rekindle his old fascination with music, and he would play for hours. When no one was listening, he had even been known to improvise a song or two.

He seated himself before the fire, the guitar across his lap and took a swig of beer while he contemplated what to play. Jenny joined him, climbing in and out of the guitar case, trying to crowd into his lap, and generally making a nuisance of herself until he stuffed his NAPA cap over her head.

"Damn cat, settle down!"

To his surprise, she pushed the cap off her head, then curled up in it, her half-grown body hanging over the sides. Ken grinned, then turned his attention to the instrument. Strong, capable fingers caressed the neck, checked the tuning.

He played a couple of familiar tunes to warm up. Soon, however, he began to improvise verses to a song that had been running through his mind lately. Most of the verses were about Annie, but he soon turned his musings to the kitten.

"...Jenny, you're one crazy cat, sleepin' in my NAPA hat.
Anybody ever tell you that you can stick around?
Maybe you can catch some mice and earn your keep,
Yeah, that would be nice..."

He made up verses, promptly forgot them and composed new ones to take their place. The song rambled on while the kitten dozed and time passed and the song-writer began to yawn. He stopped playing and checked his watch. It was later than he'd realized.

Ken put the instrument away and flopped on the couch. Picking up his forgotten beer, he took a sip, but found it warm and flat.

"Hmmm?" Jenny's great yellow eyes regarded him inquiringly before she leaped up into his lap and began a bath. He smiled down at her. Maybe Annie was right.

She had teased him that the kitten had a crush on him since she followed him about the house and yard and curled up in his lap at every opportunity. Ken always laughed at the idea, but he had noticed that Jenny was seldom far away. She had just left her warm spot by the hearth to sit with him. A cat with a crush on him. The idea was amusing. He scratched Jenny behind the ears before picking up the new farm journal.

He was deep in an article on windmills when the phone rang and startled him. He grabbed the receiver.

"Hullo?...Yeah, I'll accept. ...Annie? Hi. ...Yeah, I'm still up. ...No, no. I'm glad you called. ...Nuthin', just sittin' here with the cat. ...Aw, you know how she is, prob'ly let an owl carry her off if she was out there. You've spoiled her, hon. She can't take care of herself outside. "Sides, it's rainin' again. ...So, you got there all right? ...Yeah? No kiddin'. Goin' good, eh? ...Hey, we're just fine here. No problems."

They talked for several minutes. When Ken hung up, he realized he hadn't just been telling Annie a comforting lie. They really had gotten along all right. And Annie was coming home right on schedule, had even said she missed him. The memory warmed his eyes; he liked hearing that. Three days wasn't such a long time.

"We can make it all right, no problems."

"Hmmm?" Jenny rose, turned around, rubbed her head against his chest before curling up again. He grinned, rubbed under her chin.

"Kenny's little Jenny," he murmured.

The kitten purred smugly.

* * *

For Dianne, who wanted a Kenny and the Cat story.

Words to "Kenny's Improvisation Song" by Martie Benedict. Used by permission.

SEASIDE

Well, this is it, Rabbi.
Here we are at the sea.
I got banks to rob, Avram -
See, now, I gotta leave.

Best man at your wedding?
Naw, this here is trail's end.
Well, I . . . hey, lookit me!
I got me a best friend!

-Jacqueline Taero

kenny's improvisation song

Lord, I love my sweet little Annie,
She's got great legs and a really fine fanny.
Love to watch her move around,
And I love it when she gets down.

She's good at kissin', not at cookin',
But it don't matter 'cause she's so good lookin',
Anyway, all the other gals was tookin',
Don't throw that pillow at me, Baby.

Lighten up, Lady Anastasia
I'm only kidding, didn't mean to phase ya,
Love your kissin', yes I do.
And I love your cookin', too.

martie

Lookie, lookie, here's little Jenny,
I've got some grass, but you ain't got any.
Little kitties should not smoke,
But you can have a toke.

Jenny, you're one crazy cat
Sleepin' in my NAPA hat
Anybody ever tell you that
You can stick around?

Maybe you can catch some mice
And earn your keep, yeah that would be nice,
Maybe you can play with string,
You don't need to do a thing.

Like the life here on the farm,
It has a scintilatin' rural charm,
Maybe I'll just stay awhile,
Hey, that made Annie smile.

Raise a great big bunch of rabbits,
They've got some multiplicational habits,
But there ain't nothin' else that rhymes with rabbits,
So that's the end of that.

Maybe I'll go fix the shed,
Maybe I'll just stay in bed.
Feel so good I don't give a damn,
Comin' home from Vietnam.

benedict

SOMEWHERE OUTSIDE LOS ANGELES
JANUARY 2020

I'm not just tired --
If that was it
I'd sleep at night
Instead of -- shit --
Can't seem to keep
This fire lit.
"Too bad she won't live,"
Gaff told me.
I thought the man
Just didn't see;
Believed the line
Tyrell fed me.
No termination date
For her.
The perfect Nexus --
Yeah, doc. Sure.
Experimental;
Nothing more.
Life isn't made
Or lived that light.
What Tyrell did
Just wasn't right.
Better no past
At all for you,
Than constant doubt
About your due --
How much was hers?
How much was true?
Implants meant
To bridge the gaps
Don't help at all
When they collapse;
They leave the void
They were to fill
Deeper, wider,
Darker still.
Just like this frigid
Northern chill.

You weren't ready
For that pain --
Buckled beneath
The kind of strain
We humans learn
How to maintain
And live under
From day to day.
I couldn't think
Of what to say
To keep your darker
Fears away.
I never learned
To beat the shakes --
I learned to say
"Hell, that's the breaks."
But you were playin'
Tougher stakes.
I understand --
You had to fold.
Goddammit, but
This night is cold!
And I'm sittin' here
Feelin' old.
I got no more
Future than you.
Gaff called it better
Than he knew . . .

Past time I was
Retired, too.
Rachel, I think
I'll go with you.
Our lives were equally
A lie.
Time for peace, now.
Time to die.

D C WICKES

REPLY TO A CONVERSATION

J. A. Berger

Starring

Harrison Ford ..... Martin Stett
Gene Hackman ..... Harry Caul
Charles H. Gray ..... Mr. Grayson

I.

From the direction of the elevators, resonant footsteps paused, then continued across the huge, empty suite towards the tall, well-dressed man who stood before the bare, grime-stained plate glass windows overlooking the streets of San Francisco twenty stories below, his back to the approaching steps. A hand carelessly brushed at unruly brown hair, forcing it away from sun-browned features, before he turned to face the young executive who stood nervously before his hazel-eyed scrutiny.

"Martin, I don't like this. Why here?" The new arrival glanced uneasily about the room. "I thought we agreed to let the lease run out on these offices. We don't need them...now."

The hazel eyes, cool, appraising, studied the executive intently. "Relax..." A hint of a smile touched Stett's full, handsome lips, his voice remained low, controlled, "someone seeing you might get the idea you have troubles..."

"Troubles? Martin, damn you, I told you it was too soon. We can't afford another investigation."

Martin Stett shrugged, unconcerned. "We got through the local one, we'll get through this one.

"This is the government, Martin. The federal government. When they run one of their investigations, they don't leave a damn stone unturned!" He groaned in frightened frustration at the continued indifference in the man before him. "I tried to warn you, I really did, but no, the federal contract came up, you said bid. Damn. I knew I should have vetoed..."

"You didn't."

"Ann and I put you where you are, Martin, remember that. Don't push it too soon...or me."

"I never push, Paul...never." Rubbing a thoughtful finger across an old scar on his chin, Stett's eyes remained unreadable. "You put me out now and you'll handle your own investigation, won't you? Answer some possibly embarrassing questions, first hand, and continue to control the one man who knows more than he should. You don't want that now, do you, Paul?

"Caul. You don't think his connection in...this...could, would come to light? After all this time?!"

"As you said, they won't leave a stone unturned. Yes," Martin agreed, "they'll find Harry Caul. Of course, if we play our cards right, perhaps Mr. Caul's part could become...functional."

"I don't like it."

Eyebrows raised at the comment. "We knew the risks when we started this," Stett reminded softly. "I suggest you start exhibiting a little backbone now when it's needed, and let me do my job."

The executive flushed, but his jawline remained firm with his resolution. "Martin, go slow. Caul's scared. From your last reported observation of the man, he's showing all the classic symptoms of coming totally unglued if pressed too hard. We can't afford that happening."

"Scared?" Martin laughed humorlessly. "Of course, he's scared. That's our hold on him."

"I tell you he could be dangerous, Martin. To us. To the Corporation."

"I'll take care of it."

"If he's become unstable, as the decline in his clientele suggests, he could be very dangerous. We don't know what he might do."

"He can be handled."

Realizing his lack of control over the tall man before him, the executive sighed. "He knows too much. We should never have used him in the first place... kept it between the three of us."

Stett straightened, hazel eyes hard. "We <u>used</u> him because he's the best... was the best...there is in surveillance. His tapes were professional. They had to be believable for our plan to work. They were."

"We've come so far," the executive worried, "we can't allow anything to go wrong. Not now."

"It won't." The half-smile, half-jeer, pulled at Stett's mouth. "Trust me."

"You're so goddamn sure?"

"That's what you pay me for, isn't it? To be sure?"

"And the government investigation?"

"It's routine. Don't read more into it than there is. They'll make their usual heavy-handed inquiries, question a few people, reassure themselves that it was...an accident. Then it'll be written up into one of their five hundred page summaries that says nothing. It'll be sent to the Washington department handling this contract where it'll be read, shelved, and...forgotten."

"If that's the case, why are you so sure they'll question Caul?"

"Because his name is on one of the police reports having been seen here, right after the accident. His name will be recognized; he'll be contacted and questioned. Routine," Stett repeated.

"You can't know that."

The smile broadened, but Stett's eyes remained coolly detached. "I've seen a copy of the original report...and, I have...friends...close friends... in high places. I know."

Silence fell between the two men as each appraised the other carefully, cautiously.

"All right," the young executive gave in reluctantly. "But, Martin, we don't know what Caul may say during the questioning. If he breaks..."

"Leave Caul to me," the soft voice hardened. "You take care of that... new wife of yours." The hazel eyes bore into the executive's evasive ones. "She's likely to be questioned, too. You may find Ann's much harder to handle than our Mr. Harry Caul. When things get rough for her, 'accidents' happen to the...men in her life."

"And the men in yours," the executive snapped in reply.

Martin Stett's smile vanished. "I see we understand each other. I have things to do and you have an investigation to prepare for. Don't let me keep you."

"Stay in touch, Martin. I want to know what's happening...before it happens."

"Just stay out of my way, Paul, and we'll come through this. All of us. Interfere, and someone else may get...hurt."

II.

It was dark, close, private within the screened sanctity of the confessional in which he sat. Hands folded nervously in front of him, Harry Caul frowned, straining his senses toward the shadowy figure of the robed priest who moved behind the screen awaiting his recitation.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

"We have all sinned in the eyes of God, my Son," the soft voice replied to his fearful, stumbling declaration.

"People have been hurt. People I sought to protect...and I was wrong. I was only doing my job, I wasn't responsible for what happened...for those who were...hurt."

Silence greeted his statement.

"Father," he continued softly, "I'm not afraid of death..." The words resounded hollowly about him, jeering at the silence and the smell of fear in the small room. I am afraid of murder."

The confessional darkened. How was that possible? The walls were closing in on him. He could feel the pressure of their cold presence, forcing him to the screen and the dark, shadowy figure behind it. His face pressed to the wire, the screen dissolved, receding before him, disclosing the robed figure, the face hidden in the shadows of the cowl.

From somewhere a candle flared, for he was conscious of light, from an unknown source, behind him, striking the robed figure with a yellow, flickering light, bringing a face into stark outline. Harry Caul screamed. The figure moved closer; the face, lifeless, white, and familiar. Harry Caul screamed again and again.

The face dissolved into the darkness, the confessional nothing more than the barren, cold, featureless walls of the tiny flat in which he lived. Caul sat upright, his eyes wide, filled with the horror of his nightmare, his body trembling from the after effects of his vision, the lifeless face of the Director still vivid in his memory; a man dead but not forgotten...never forgotten.

He rubbed a shaking hand over his stubbled cheek, staring at the bare walls around him. There was nothing to warrant the threat, the fear, he still experienced from the dream. But, neither was there anything within his cold surroundings that offered sanctity from it. His wandering gaze carefully isolated and identified each and every darkened shape within the small flat; the badly scarred table that stood on three of its four legs, the fourth off the floor by an eighth of an inch; the two straight-backed, wooden, kitchen chairs; and the sagging sofa-bed on which he sat. The wallpaper was as old as the flat's ancient furnishings, faded, stained from past roof leaks and moisture from other unknown sources. The one window was painted shut, its panes fogged with the dust and grime of the city. His eyes focused, held, to the small table beside the bed and the partially empty whiskey bottle and dirty, spotted drinking glass beside it. He poured himself a stiff drink, willing his hand to steady enough to fill the glass, before he sat the bottle down.

Fumbling in his eagerness, he bumped the phone, spilling some of the glass's contents across the face of the instrument, blurring the typed number on the face plate. He ignored it. He had changed the number a half dozen times since he had taken the flat, until the number on the plate had long since lost track of the current number in the instrument's systems. So had he. It made no difference; the number, unlisted, uncirculated, was as anonymous as the flat.

He drew a deep breath and drained the glass. The darkness, the silence of the small flat and the benign presence of the black instrument beside his bed was his source of security from the outside world.

The phone rang even as he stared at the device, the intrusion invading the peace he had drawn from it's very silence. Reaching hurriedly for the bottle, he poured himself another drink, his eyes never leaving the phone. It continued its urgent, angry summons, ignoring his hurried drink, his trembling hands, his red-rimmed eyes dark with building fear.

He glanced at his watch, squinting in the semi-darkness of neon illumination that filtered in from the dirty window, making the time by the watch's own digital light, harder still to read. It was 3:00 a.m.

The phone continued to ring, it's harshness seeming to take on an irritation of its own; a threatening insistance to be answered. He closed his hands into tight fists, his palms wet with the perspiration of fear; from the aftermath of the nightmare or from a phone which should not be ringing?

Was it getting louder? No, he reasoned; it was his imagination and the lateness of the hour. He clasped his hands over his ears. It was a wrong number. In another couple of rings, when he didn't answer, they would hang up.

The phone continued to ring.

He screamed his fear, but silently, his mind reverberating with it. Throwing himself across the badly tumbled bed, Harry Caul covered his head with the sweat stained pillow in an attempt to close out the ringing. Instead, he reestablished contact with the darkness and the fragments of his nightmare. He threw the pillow from him. Irritated with his weakness, his fear, Caul reached for the phone. Lifting the receiver, the instrument ceased its urgency and awaited his acknowledgement. He put the device cautiously to his head.

"Yes?" he whispered, his mouth dry, his voice hard.

"Be very careful, Mr. Caul."

The voice was a man's, soft, gentle, familiar; a voice Harry Caul feared above all others. He made no move to answer, knowing he could not, had he tried. Fear had closed his voice box.

"We don't want anyone else getting hurt, do we, Mr. Caul?" the voice cajoled. "Don't get involved. It's none of your business."

The phone went dead, returning the instrument to normalcy with the benign sound of the dial tone.

Harry Caul replaced the receiver gently into its cradle. He glanced again about the small, featureless flat. He had been so sure this time; so sure that the man behind the soft voice would not find him, but he had. It was a worse nightmare than the one that had awakened him.

III.

The government building was cold, featureless, and reeked of authority as Harry Caul stepped from the elevator into the narrow, empty corridor of the eighth floor. He stood for a moment, allowing the doors to close silently behind him, before moving forward, his thin, plastic rain coat rustling softly against his rumpled suit coat. His hair long, unkempt, had been hurriedly finger-combed on his way up in an attempt to conceal the increasing bald spot on the top of his head; his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep, too much liquor, and an ever-present fear of things to come.

He thought again of the phone call that had come to him in the dead of night and the soft, deadly...yes, deadly, was the proper description of the voice that haunted him. The voice that reached into, and past, his security, his privacy, where none had reached before. Surveillance was his business and he was good; he was the best on the West Coast. He shook his head as he glanced hurriedly at the numbers on the closed doors he passed, then at his watch. He was early.

The summons to this appointment had come that morning. Early. By Government Courier. He could not have ignored it. But how could Stett have known? This was the Government; the United States of America. The Federal Government. His power could not reach this far. And why was the government interested in him? He'd handled very little government business for some time, the bigger money in private work. He had steered away from the government projects offered him, sending them instead to Moran who was struggling to unseat his reputation. And, he was succeeding, Caul hesitated to admit. Since that day...the Jack Tar Hotel and the realization of what he'd innocently been a part of. It had been increasingly hard to involve himself in his work as he'd done in the past. It was New York all over again, but this time he had not run. It would have been useless; he was a haunted man.

He stopped.

Looking about, he drew a deep breath, then turned and retraced his steps to a door he had passed moments before. He rechecked the number. It was the same as on the summons. He turned the knob and stepped into the small, but spacious office revealed by the opened door.

The waiting room was well-lighted from floor-to-ceiling windows which revealed a blue, cloudless sky. A middle-aged woman, neatly dressed, sat behind a desk in the center of the room busily typing. She stopped as he walked in.

"Mr. Caul? Harry Caul?"

"Yes." He cleared his throat nervously and repeated the acknowledgement.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Caul. Mr. Grayson will be with you shortly. You are a bit early." She nodded to a chair before reaching for the phone and dialing an inside line. She spoke softly, briefly, into the mouth piece, then returned it to the cradle and continued with her typing.

Caul glanced around the room, then took the offered seat. He sat on the edge of the chair, his hands tightly clasped between his knees, waiting; for

what, he didn't know, but his instincts warned him it was likely to be unpleasant. He started, glancing up at the secretary who was now standing beside the desk looking at him expectantly.

"Mr. Caul? Mr. Grayson can see you now."

He got to his feet and followed her to the closed door behind her desk. She opened it, stepping aside to allow him in ahead of her; she carried a steno pad and pencil. He stiffened involuntarily, but preceded her into the room.

The office they entered was small but expensively furnished; it was not the office of a 'low' government official. His suspicions mounted. This was serious. He studied the man who stood before him.

In his late fifties, or early sixties, his face weathered, sun-tanned, Mr. Grayson was a big man over six feet in height, his body solid, muscles firm; a man more suited to the out-of-doors than the office where he currently resided. Faded blue eyes, accented by blond hair lightly touched with grey, missed nothing as Caul moved into the room and reached for the outstretched hand, a hand as big and powerful as the man it belonged to. Whatever else the man was, Caul reasoned, he would be efficient. FBI or CIA, Mr. Grayson still carried himself like the field trained agent he had been...or possibly...still was. He would be dangerous if crossed and, Caul suspected, a man not easily lied to. He returned the firm handshake.

"Mr. Caul, I'm glad you could come...so promptly."

"Mr. Grayson," Caul acknowledged, trying hard to hold the steady gaze of the cool eyes, "I was under the impression that if I didn't come...promptly, I would have been brought."

The laugh lines about the blue eyes deepened, a smile touched the big man's lips briefly. "But you came, didn't you, Mr. Caul? Please, take a seat. I'll make this as quick...as painless...as possible. I know you have other things you would rather be doing. Mrs. Collins, here, will be taking down our conversation, so please don't be concerned with her presence."

"Why?" Caul asked, taking the offered seat before the desk.

"This is a federal investigation I'm conducting, Mr. Caul. As such, all questioning of those involved must be documented."

"What department is conducting this investigation?"

The blue eyes hardened. "I'm not free to discuss that, Mr. Caul. But I do represent our government in this matter, and you <u>are</u> required to answer the questions I put before you, or you will do so before a Federal Court Justice. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry Caul made no comment and Grayson nodded. "Good. Let's begin."

The secretary, Mrs. Collins, opened her steno pad, crossed her not unshapely legs, and prepared to take down their conversation.

Reaching into his desk drawer, Grayson pulled out a folded newspaper and handed it across the desk to Caul who accepted it reluctantly, opening it to the front page. The headlines leaped, in bold print, from the page at him: EXECUTIVE KILLED IN AUTO CRASH.

His hand shook as he closed the paper and handed it back, aware of the government man watching him closely.

"You remember those headlines, Mr. Caul? You recall that 'accident,' don't you?"

"Yes..," he cleared his throat. "The...Director was a very influential man in this city."

"And beyond this city, Mr. Caul. His Corporation, chain of corporations," Grayson corrected, "have held various government contracts for many, many years. He had a lot of 'pull,' shall we say, in high places. He was a 'respected' man. Now, before we can continue this association with his 'change of command,' we must be sure...very sure, Mr. Caul, of those who now hold the 'reins.'"

Interest pulled Caul to the edge of his chair. "I don't understand how I come into this, Grayson. Is this a professional call?"

Silence greeted his inquiry.

"We...have reason to believe, Mr. Caul, that you...may...know something of this matter." He tapped the front page of the returned paper.

Caul stiffened unexpectantly. "What...do you mean?"

"Come now, Mr. Caul. You've worked with us before, in that past. You know our procedures in an investigation of this nature." Silence greeted Grayson's statement and the blue-eyed gaze intensified. "Do I have to remind you of the Teamster's Local-Welfare Fraud of 1968? New York? You were working for the Attorney General at the time, weren't you, Mr. Caul?"

"Yes, yes," Caul spoke hurriedly, not wanting anything more put into words from a past he had thought long dead. "I...don't understand the...connection... with...with that case and, and...this one."

"You are very good at what you do, Mr. Caul. I think this...case...as you call it, holds a great deal of similar interest for you...and I think you're scared, Mr. Caul. Why?"

Caul's eyes widened. His hands shook as he glanced hurriedly from Grayson to the secretary who wrote intently, uninterested in the conversation before her, possibly unaware of the building tension mounting between the two men. He remained silent, stunned.

I've been through the police files concerning that accident, Mr. Caul. Did you know your name appears in those files?"

"What? How?" Caul's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"You were seen, recognized, reported at the Director's office just hours after the accident was made public, inside, being ejected, bodily, by several young corporate officers. I want to know, Mr. Caul, why were you there?"

Caul sat still, perspiration beaded on his forehead and he felt the wet trickle of it under his arms. "That's been...some...some time ago," he stammered evasively.

"Maybe this will...jar your memory, Mr. Caul." Grayson picked up a small business card and tossed it across the desk to him. "It's one of yours, isn't it?"

Caul made no effort to pick up the small, dirt stained, pasteboard. He nodded.

"That was found in the Director's suit pocket after the accident. Can you tell me how it got there, Mr. Caul?"

"I have...no idea. A lot of people have my business cards."

Grayson watched Caul closely. "Did you know the deceased?"

"No."

"Professionally, perhaps?"

"I...if that were the case, Mr. Grayson, I would not be at liberty to discuss my client's business with you. It would have to remain confidential... at all times," he croaked harshly.

"That's all you'll say about it, Mr. Caul? Believe me, we're trying to make this as easy on you as possible. To continue to do that, we must have your complete cooperation. I wouldn't like this to become...nasty, Mr. Caul." His fingers tapped the desk in growing irritation. "Well, Mr. Caul, do you have anything more to add?"

Caul remained silent.

Grayson got to his feet announcing the end of the questioning. Caul followed suit gratefully.

"You're excused, Mr. Caul. For now. But we will be talking again, I assure you. And, next time, Mr. Caul, I will know you...and those in your life...as well as you do yourself. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Caul? There <u>will</u> be more questions; and you, Mr. Caul, will have the answers."

"If that's all..."

Grayson nodded, his lined face stern, blue eyes intense. "Until next time, Mr. Caul. Until next time."

Caul walked to the door and let himself out.

* * *

Harry Caul never remembered leaving the government building, only the cold wind that greeted him on entering the street from the federal high rise. Gratefully, he drew in great lungs full of the fresh, ocean breezes. His hands still trembled, his brow drying rapidly in the coldness of outside. He hurried across the street, walking rapidly eastward, putting distance as quickly as possible between himself and the meeting he had just had; his thoughts, his mind, in panicked turmoil, agitation and fear. It wasn't over. Grayson had said they would talk again and he meant it. How could he stay uninvolved any longer? He was being sucked in like a small leaf in a whirlpool, and he was scared.

Grayson had been right; he did know the procedures governing one of these high priority investigations, and this man, Grayson, was a professional who smelled of efficiency. He would ask questions and he would get answers, and Caul knew the next questioning session would make the last look like a Sunday School meeting.

A traffic light changed, stopping him, making him suddenly aware of his surroundings. He stiffened. Across the street from him stood the high rise that had once housed the Director's offices; offices he had visited on more than one occasion. He crossed with the light.

Why had his steps taken him here? Now? He had avoided the area since that...day. The offices of the Corporation were no longer housed in this high rise, he knew that, having read of their relocation soon after the...accident. So why had he come? Now? Today? Shrugging, he gave in to his intuition and entered the building, taking the elevator to the remembered floor high above the traffic crowded city of San Francisco. The surge of silent rising brought a moment of sickness to his stomach that lurched when the conveyance slowed and stopped, silently opening to the programmed floor. He stepped out.

The lobby to the executive suites was as he remembered it, only deserted, empty of the expensive furnishings he had seen there on his last visit. He crossed the recently waxed floor to the suite's doors which still proclaimed *PRIVATE* to those approaching them. Caul tried them, expecting to find them locked to his entry; the knob turned under his hand. He froze. Later he would ask himself why he hadn't left then; he should have. He didn't. Perhaps, he would reason, he already knew it was too late to go back. He opened the door and stepped into the empty office overlooking the harbor, the sounds of the tugs faint, familiar, to his ears.

"Come in, Mr. Caul. I've been expecting you."

"How did you know I would come?" It was a question unemotionally asked; Caul's fear so great he could no longer react to it as he faced the man who belonged to the soft voice which had talked to him over the phone the night before.

"You're very predictable, Mr. Caul." Martin Stett crossed the room to meet the older man in the cheap plastic raincoat and the mussed hair. "How did your meeting with...Mr. Grayson, I believe...go?"

"You knew about." It was a statement with no surprise to it. "You knew last night...when you called."

"Of course." The hazel eyes were cold, unemotional, intent on the man before them. "You've become, shall we say, a pet project of mine, Mr. Caul."

"I'm not...afraid of death," Caul recited hesitantly, his eyes vacant with fear.

"Every man's afraid of death, Mr. Caul." Stett disagreed softly. "Every man."

"I wasn't...responsible...for what happened."

"Of course not," the soft voice soothed, reassuring him. "And, if you are very careful, Mr. Caul, everything will work out just fine. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Mr. Caul?"

"He asked...questions," Caul stammered, a flicker of life returning to his dark eyes.

"Questions, Mr. Caul, are only dangerous when you don't have answers."

"There'll be more...ones I'll have...have to answer." Fear leaped into Caul's dark eyes, mirroring his inability to cope with the building crisis.

"It's all right, Mr. Caul. I'll see that Mr. Grayson has...questions that you can answer, I assure you." Martin Stett smiled, his handsome face radiating an innocence not reflected in the hazel eyes. "You just answer them, Mr. Caul. Understand?"

Harry Caul nodded absently, turning, slowly retracing his steps to the door; his hand reached for the knob before Stett stopped him. "I wouldn't move your residence again, Mr. Caul. I'll find you, like I've done, what now, three, four times? And Mr. Grayson might misunderstand, perhaps take it as a sign you were trying to avoid him--and his questions--instead of me. We don't want him suspicious, do we, Mr. Caul?"

The door opened to his touch and Caul stepped through.

"By the way, Mr. Caul. I liked that piece you were playing last night just before you retired...a contemporary jazz piece, wasn't it? You're getting very good."

Caul's hand shook as he closed the door, putting it between himself and his nemesis. Four times, he'd moved to escape Stett and his phone calls. He had swept each and every apartment repeatedly; he could have sworn each one had been 'clean,' and still Stett knew his every move, his every thought, his every heartbeat...was there no escape from him? Ever?

IV.

Harry Caul was late for the next meeting at the government building, and as he lengthened his strides to compensate for time lost, he glanced furtively about. Every person, on the streets around him, was watching him; he could feel their eyes. They were listening to him, his breathing, labored now, his heartbeats, stepped up with his increased exertion. Eyes, ears, everywhere; seeing, hearing, observing, listening to Harry Caul, waiting for him to slip,

to make a mistake, to speak of things he wanted only to be allowed to forget. He wasn't afraid of death. He was afraid of murder. His words. They echoed within his mind, his being, taunting, jeering at him, attempting to make him prove his own statement. If he were not afraid of death, why didn't he tell what he knew. What did he know? Suspicions. The horror of knowledge misread. The innocent becoming the guilty. Upside down logic in a world gone crazy with suspicions and mistrust. He had no proof. He no longer had the tapes. He no longer had the pictures. The money, long gone to pay bills his business no longer supported, had been paid in cash; no bill, no receipt was given in his business.

He entered the building, taking the elevator to the appointed floor and quickly stepped out as the doors snapped closed behind him. There were no eyes here. No ears. This was the Federal Government, his government; they had their own eyes, their own ears. Stett's power could not reach here. He straightened his tie and ran nervous fingers through his wind-tossed hair, trying to force it into some semblance of order. This time he did not pass the door to the right officer; he turned the knob and entered.

Mrs. Collins was at the inner office door, her face stern, displeased with his tardiness. She nodded. "Mr. Caul, this way please. Mr. Grayson doesn't like to be kept waiting. He's a very busy man."

Caul mumbled his apology, stepping past her into the now familiar office. He hesitated as she pulled the door closed behind him, leaving him alone with the big man who stood awaiting him.

"Mrs. Collins will not sit with us today, Mr. Caul." Grayson spoke curtly, motioning the surveillance man to the leather-bound chair he had occupied the day before. The government man stood; tall, imposing, in the confines of the small office. "Sit down, Mr. Caul."

"Mr. Grayson, I'm not a man who...who likes questions. In my line of business...there are such...questions as I am...not free...to answer."

"Oh, there will be questions, Mr. Caul, I assure you." Grayson's voice, soft, low, held a note of authoritative threat to it. "And, you, sir, will provide the answers, the right answers, or I'll bring charges against you before you leave this office that will tie you up in federal red tape for years. Years, Mr. Caul, [illegible] down."

Harry Caul sat down.

"Who were you meeting, Mr. Caul, at the Jack Tar Hotel, at 3:00 the day the Director died...in the 'fatal' car wreak?" The faded blue eyes bore into Caul.

The question hit with explosive, unexpectedness, catching Caul unaware, unprepared. "No...no one," he stuttered, his hands growing clammy.

"Then why were you there, Mr. Caul?"

Too stunned to answer, Caul could only shake his head.

"We have photostats of the hotel's register, Mr. Caul. We know you were there, in the adjoining room to 773. Answer my question, Mr. Caul, or I assure you this session is going to get very unpleasant. I don't like the 'smell' that I'm getting from this case, Mr. Caul, or from you." The soft voice had hardened, the blue eyes cold, as Grayson leaned across the desk towards Caul. "I...dislike...blackmail of any kind, Mr. Caul, and I dislike blackmailers even more. I suspect, Mr. Caul, when I get the answers to my questions, I'm not going to like you either." He straightened; his size, his bulk, domineering the space around him. "Why were you there, Mr. Caul?"

"I...I was following...a hunch," he stammered. "I was...wrong."

"I won't be lied to, Mr. Caul, and don't take me for a fool. I've heard the tapes. Your tapes, Mr. Caul. I've seen the pictures." The look of aversion crossed the weathered, lined features of the agent. "I know your work, Mr. Caul. It's very good. Your business, in this case...was dirt, Mr. Caul."

"If...if...you heard them..." Harry Caul sweated, his voice tight with fear, the faint hope of being understood fading rapidly before the anger in the government man at the mention of the tapes. "Then...you know..."

"I heard a...conversation. A conversation, Mr. Caul, between two young people in love. Recorded. Why, Mr. Caul? I heard no mention of 'company secrets' being exchanged, nothing relating to a 'business arrangement' of any sort. Why were they bugged, Mr. Caul? And, why by you?"

"I...can't...discuss my client's reasoning, Mr. Grayson. It was...a job. I was not involved...not responsible...for what followed..."

"A job." Grayson took his seat, leaning back to better observe the man seated across from him. His hand fingered his chin thoughtfully, his elbow on the arm of the chair. "This...job was different, wasn't it, Mr. Caul? Upsetting, perhaps? Why?" The question was asked in a note of puzzlement as if asked of himself, to himself, more than to the edgy surveillance man. "This is your business, Mr. Caul. Why should this job be any different than any other? Men in your business aren't supposed to feel anything, are you? Just do the job and get paid for it. Why was this job any different, Mr. Caul?"

"I..." Caul cleared his throat, trying again. "I don't...understand what you mean."

"I think you do." Grayson stated simply, the blue eyes held to Caul tightly. "But I'll refresh your memory, if you like." He sat forward and shuffled through several files on the top of his desk, before glancing again at Caul. "You see, since the last time you were here, Mr. Caul, I've been doing my job." He opened one of the files before continuing. "At the time you were working on this case, I've been told by several friends and acquaintances of yours, that you were acting strangely, edgy, uncommunicative...secretive.

"I talked with a Mr. William P. Moran who said he heard some of the same tapes I heard when he was at your shop right after you taped them. That you had reason to be proud of the accomplishment of...how did he say it? 'Buggin' this conversation in Union Square, during a crowded lunch hour, with only three 'passes,' while the couple walked, talked, kept moving because they had been

'bugged' before. That you had to have their actual voices so the...client would believe the tapes. And none of this information was given out by you to a fellow colleague but by a co-worker of long standing, a long-time friend. How long had he worked for you, with you, Mr. Caul? But he made a mistake, didn't he? He talked about this case, this job, and you fired him. I find that interesting, Mr. Caul. Mr. Moran and Stan found it puzzling...out of character, Mr. Caul. I wonder why?" He pushed the file aside and reached for another one.

"You had a lady friend, a Miss Amy Fredericks, who felt she was being watched while she was 'seeing' you, Mr. Caul, that her phone had been 'bugged,' said you would never talk about yourself when you were with her; where you lived, your work, all the things most couples talk easily about with each other. But when she persisted, you cut off the relationship that had been a good one until then." He glanced again at Caul. "And, again, this was about the same time you were working on the...job." He slapped the file closed, and turned to still another one.

"Mrs. Vagalista was your...excuse me...one of your last landlords. You've been moving a lot lately, haven't you, Mr. Caul...all since the...accident. Again...interesting. I was told you accused Mrs. Vagalista of 'reading' your mail, breaking into your apartment when you were out, and literally 'spying' on you." The heavy, grey flecked eyebrows rose as the blue eyes glanced at the page in front of him. "From the cost of 'remodeling' your apartment after...your eviction...I would say her choice of words was very accurate. You did demolish that apartment, didn't you, Mr. Caul. The time? Soon after the...job and the...accident. Why, Mr. Caul? Anger? Frustration? Did something pertaining to this...job of yours go wrong?" He snapped the last file shut and threw it on the pile with the others.

"Are you going to just sit there, Mr. Caul, and tell me this was a routine job for you? That this...mounting...paranoia...was the result of just 'another job'? You know what I think, Mr. Caul? I think you were stepping out of your league...and the law...on this one. I think you saw a quick way to some quick bucks, and you decided to take it. And, even now, I don't think you know, really know, why it didn't work, do you, Mr. Caul?"

Things were going too fast for Harry Caul. He rubbed clammy hands along his trouser seams, attempting to dry the palms. The room suddenly close, the silence around him closing in. He could hear his heart beating. Who else could hear it? Grayson? No doubt. Stett? Of course. Stett heard everything.

No! He glanced about the small room. This was the Federal Government. Stett had been an assistant to a 'power;' yes, he might still wield a great deal of the same power, but it couldn't reach here. Not this high. Not to the seat of the Federal Government of the United Stated!

"Maybe I should tell you, Mr. Caul. I'm sure it's something that's been weighing heavily on your mind for some time. It's one thing to...kill...for love, for hate, even for advancement and money. But it must be hell for a man to find he's killed...for nothing. I think that's the devil on your back, Mr. Caul. And I think he's coming to take you to where you belong. I'm going to try to help him, Mr. Caul, you can bank on that!

V.

Harry Caul walked the streets of San Francisco in a daze. Charges would be filed, accusations made, proof recorded and admitted against him. His own tapes, his own pictures. And, in his attempt to prevent what he had feared was to happen, he had stepped into a noose and someone had pulled it taut. In his stunned, fogged mind, he could appreciate the logic behind his betrayal. He was to be the sacrificial lamb to the continued well-being of the Corporation.

He crossed the street against the light, avoiding a rushing car with the narrowness of inches. He did not hear the horn nor the angry, half-frightened obscenities screamed at him from the driver; he did hear Grayson's voice as he had sealed Caul's own fate.

Blackmail.

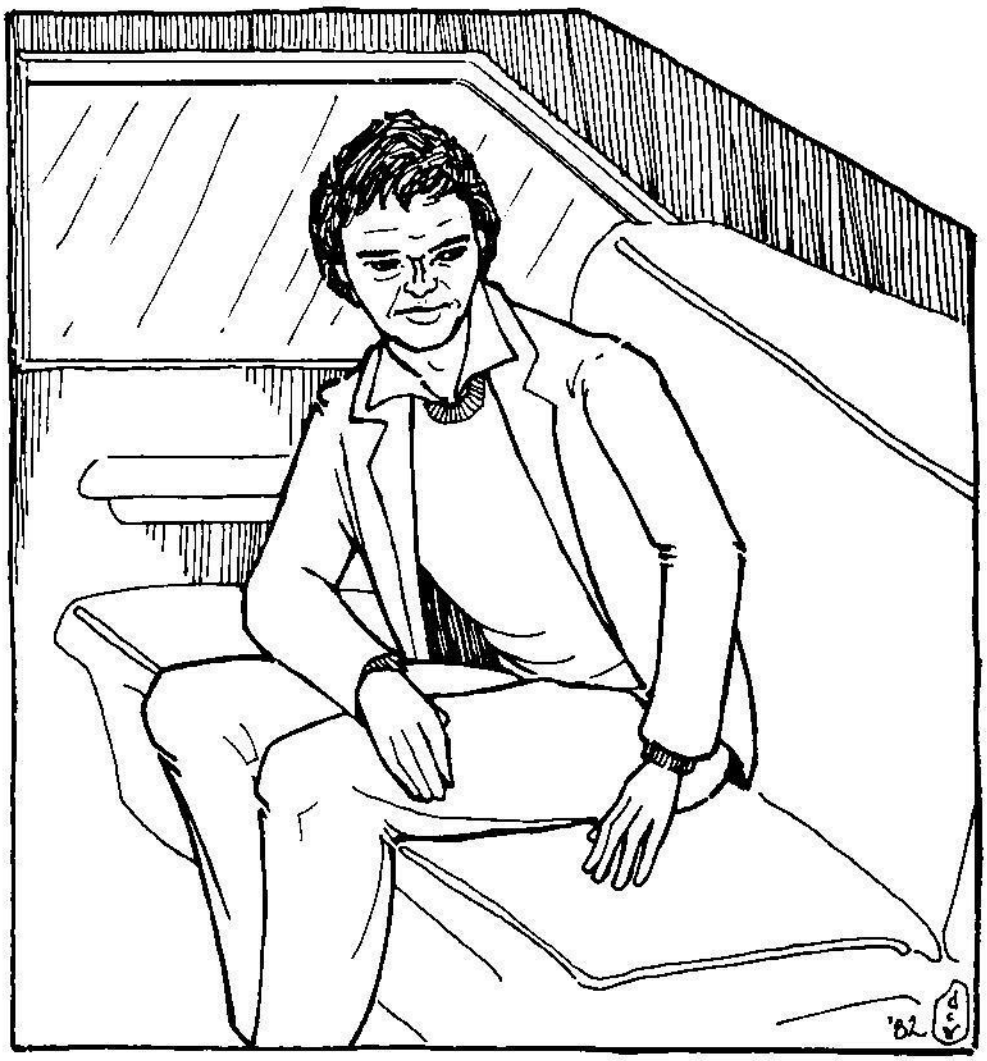
They were accusing him of blackmailing the Director and the Corporation. It was so logical. So foolproof. Set up by an expert; someone who had been there from the first, someone who had known both sides, had seen both sides. He didn't have to put a name to that person. He knew.

He had taped the conversation. Taken the pictures. He had been seen going to...coming from...the Director's offices. The tapes, the pictures, had been offered...once...but not released. 'The price not right, Caul? So corporate officers acquired them. Perhaps not legally, by law. But, then the tapes, the pictures, were illegal to begin with, weren't they, Caul?' Still, disgusted, the Director had paid him $15,000 in cash to be done with it. He had taken the money. 'There was a witness to that. They also had proof of the money's withdrawal from corporate funds for that...payoff.'

He could still hear Grayson's voice, the accusation, hard...cold... "That wasn't enough, was it, Caul? You took the adjoining room to the 'lovers' and did some more 'bugging,' didn't you? Oh, we found the hole in the bathroom. What happened then we're not sure. Not now. But we'll tie up the loose ends, I assure you. I think you went out to a pay phone and contacted the Director, told him what you had, and he told you what to do with it, didn't he, Mr. Caul? And he died that same day...perhaps only hours after that last conversation. I think you killed the Director, Mr. Caul. I don't know how...yet. But I'll find out. I will find out, Mr. Caul."

The words echoed, re-echoed through his mind, growing louder, louder, ever louder as he walked the streets, unseeing, his mind in a spiralling overload, his paranoia, his fear, growing. "I'm not afraid of death. I am afraid of murder."

"Under normal circumstances, Mr. Caul," Grayson had continued, "it would have worked...should have worked. Slander. A sordid extramarital affair at the top of the Corporation. Headline news! Not earthshattering, in this day and age, as it would have been say thirty, forty years ago, but still...irritating, corruptive...and the stockmarket listens to these things, don't they, Mr. Caul? It should have worked. You must have really wondered, lost sleep nights, wondering; wondering why it didn't. Even if the Director knew, which obviously he did from that last conversation the two of you had, why hadn't it worked?!"



Grayson had stood before him, imposing in his size, his stature, his authority unquestioned, as he dropped the bomb. It hadn't worked because the Director had wanted it known...out in the open. Why? Because while interested eyes watched that 'relationship,' they were not watching another--his own. "You see, Mr. Caul, even in this day and time, there are still some 'relationships' that are not as easily accepted...as others. You, Mr. Caul, were on the right track to making a hell of a lot of money with your scheme. You made only one mistake. One failing in your logic. You went after the wrong couple, Mr. Caul, the wrong couple."

Harry Caul turned the corner, the wind from the bay whipping the thin raincoat about his legs. He didn't know how far he'd walked or where exactly he was, but the Bay, the bridge, was before him, stretching out in a midday beauty all its own. The traffic was unusually light for midafternoon; he drank in the peacefulness of his surroundings and the serenity of the open sky, the open water...around him.

His well-being was short lived as his concentration focused on the blue limousine parked at the curb several steps ahead of him, the silent exhaust showing a light tracing of smoke as the car idled, waiting...

He knew the car. An elegant blue Mercedes with smoked windows, license C 1. The official car of the Director...the new Director, he corrected himself. There was no sign of movement behind the smoked glass, but someone was in it, he sensed it. Curiousity moved him forward.

He bent down to look in but the smoked glass only reflected back his own haggard image. Silently, the door on the passenger side opened, and he leaned further down.

"Get in, Mr. Caul, I'll take you...home. It's been a trying day for you. I'm sure you'll be glad to see the...end...of it."

Demoralized past further surprise, Harry Caul looked into the youthful, handsome face of the man behind the wheel of the limousine, Martin Stett.

"Get in, Mr. Caul. It would be fruitless to make a scene." Stett's voice was soft, cajoling, confident.

Harry Caul glanced about; there was no one on the usually busy streets about him. He got into the car. "I'm not afraid...of death...," he whispered. The car door closed silently behind him.

"Of course not, Mr. Caul," the soft, the deadly, voice reassured him. "You're afraid of me."

Deadline for submissions to FLIP OF A COIN 2 is April 15, 1983.
Send $3.00 deposit and SASE for final price notification.

AFTER THE MISSION

(Hanover Street Waltz)

Martic Benedict

War is a taker, it tears you apart
But sometimes it holds out a hope for the heart--
A love that transcends any time, and place--
Like the love that he found in her beautiful face.

After the mission, I'll come back for you
And we'll make our promises then.
Don't say it's too late for me,
Maggie, please wait for me.
After the mission, I'll kiss you again.

Halloran silently vowed he'd survive,
And somehow he'd come back to Maggie alive.
Through the flames and the wreckage, through enemy lands
He lived for her love and the touch of her hands.

No options were left when his plane was shot down,
Stranded in France with the Germans all around.
He defended the man he'd been ordered to fly
And offered to help him, though he wasn't sure why.

Together they pilfered the enemies' plans.
Together they took off, together they ran.
But the fighter was Halloran, forced to defend
Not only his own life, but the life of a friend.

Hiding in secret, they talked for awhile.
The thought of the women they loved made them smile.
But he found to a sorrow he was hard-pressed to hide,
His Maggie belonged to the man at his side.

And Sellinger never knew Halloran's grief
When, wounded and dying, he begged him to leave.
But Halloran held him and gave him his life
And saved him to go back to Maggie, his wife.

After the mission, I'll come back to you--
Darling, I hope you won't cry--
I know it's too late for me,
You couldn't wait for me.
After the mission, I'll kiss you goodbye . . .

"PLUS CEA CHANGE ..."

Pat Nussman

Civilization! If this was it, then the poor ignorant bastards could have it with his blessings.

He coughed, ejecting large chunks of the unpaved street from his mouth back to its natural environment. *Folks think livin' out in the prairie is dangerous? They should try this place. 'Cept you'd have to be crazier than a coyote to live here.* He coughed again, experimentally. It was for damn sure that his lungs were coated about a foot thick with street dust. No way to avoid it when it rose in great choking clouds every time some wagon went by. And a lot went by. His lungs were probably shot for life.

He ducked back, pressing flat against a nearby building just in time to avoid having his boots tracked by wagon wheels. *None of the folks 'round here can drive.* Splinters from the raw boards pressed into his shoulders. *They can't sand wood any too well, neither.*

Dangerous place, San Francisco. No way in the world was Tommy Lillard stickin' around it.

Now if he could only convince Avram.

Tommy dealt the side of the schoolhouse a hearty thump, a sign that Avram should quit his jawin' with the lady teacher and come on along, if he was plannin' to get his errands done today. He wasn't stupid enough to go talkin' to any schoolmarm, that was for damn sure. He'd had enough of them back in Georgia, dried up old prunes.

He shrugged impatiently. Hell, he didn't know what he was doin', anyhow, followin' the rabbi 'round town like some damn old sheepdog. Just 'cause Avram couldn't get across the country by himself, didn't mean he couldn't cross the blasted street alone.

Tommy held his breath while another heavily-laden wagon came within a half-inch of his dusty boot.

Had to admit, though. It wasn't easy as it sounded. Not around here.

Ah, hell! Stupid fool. Stop arguin' with him and just head out. No reason to stick around here. He's married, cozy as a rabbit in a burrow. His congregation's just plumb crazy about him, now that they're used to his ways. Doesn't need me around any more, that's for damn sure, just thinks he does.

"Damn fool," he muttered, "makin' me follow him around everywhere."

"Who's the bigger fool?" The astringent tones seemed to come from nowhere. "The fool or the fool who follows him?"

The first time Tommy looked in the direction of the voice, he saw nothing. It wasn't until he adjusted his sight downward that he found the voice's owner.

The voice was a lot more impressive than the owner, her aggressive stance notwithstanding. Even in her laced-up boots, she stood no higher than five foot zero and everything else about her was to scale, from her shapely ankles to her regally-held head. Her dress, though, was as tight-laced as her voice, the prim white frock and firmly-wound coronet of brown hair announcing more loudly than words her profession.

She-eet! thought Tommy. *They sure ain't makin' schoolmarms like they used to. No wonder Avram was in there so long!*

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you going to answer me, Mr. Lillard, or are you just going to stand there and gawk?"

Tommy smiled. It was his best slow, maddening grin. It had broke a lot of hearts, out Virginia City way. "Reckon I'm just gonna stand here and gawk, ma'am, if it's all the same to you." Remembering his manners, he reached up to scoop off his hat, holding it politely before him.

The schoolmarm stood and glared at him. It didn't seem to be all the same to her, nor did his best grin appear to be having any obvious effect.

"The rabbi tells me that you're a friend of his, Mr. Lillard." She said his name like she was talking around an unripe persimmon.

"Yeah, that's right," he said cautiously. *His best friend, that's what he said. Made a fellow feel good, havin' a man like the rabbi call him that.*

Tommy wouldn't have thought her gaze could get any harder, but it did.

"He tells me that you're planning on up and leaving him, just like that." She raised one small hand as if to snap her fingers, then lowered it hurried. Tommy guessed it would've been unladylike. "Leave him among strangers while you go out robbing banks or stopping trains or whatever it is you do."

Damn, but Avram had a big mouth on him. What was he going to do next, take out an advertisement in the paper? *My friend, the bank robber,* that's what it would read. 'Sides, it wasn't no such thing. She made Avram sound like an orphan of the storm, 'stead of a happy married man with a congregation hangin' on his every word.

"Hey, lady, it's not like that at all. He's--"

Ruthlessly, she cut through his protest. "You're quite a mercenary, aren't you?" She sliced him with a glance, her eyes seeming to drill into his naked soul. "I wonder if you really care about anything--or anybody?"

She turned on one heel and stalked away, her skirt trailing out triumphantly behind and picking up quite a bit of the street on its way. As she sailed into the schoolhouse, Avram crept out, wincing at the expression on Tommy's face.

Lybarger 82

"Do all rabbis have such damn big mouths?" Tommy demanded.

Wisely, Avram remained silent.

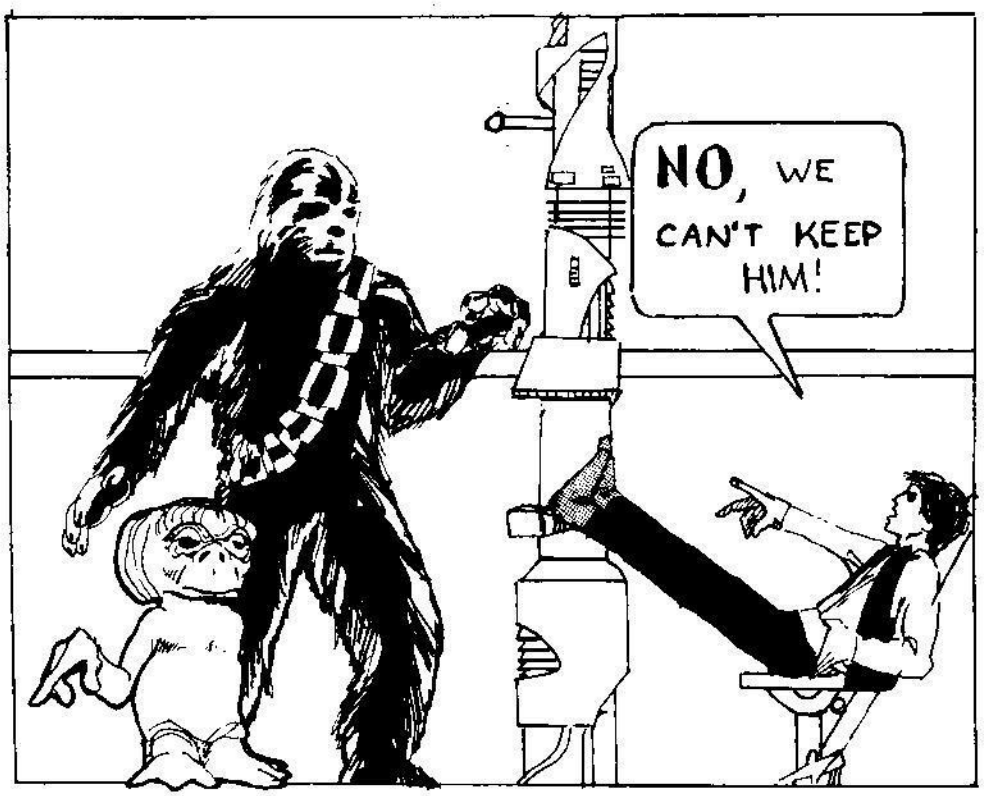
Balked of an argument, Tommy contented himself a lethal stare. *Stick around? Damn straight he'd stick around! Long enough to show her not to try and push Tommy Lillard where he didn't want to go. Push Tommy Lillard and he'd push back, and she was gonna learn <u>that</u> before she was much older.*

"Who <u>is</u> she?" Tommy was yelling now, oblivious to the curious stares of pedestrians and wagoneers alike. "Who does she <u>think</u> she is?" One calloused hand described a short, chopping motion through the dust-filled air. "No, never mind. I don't think I really wanna know."

He stomped away, narrowly missing a collision with a lumber cart.

Avram addressed Tommy's retreating back. "Her name's Leah." The rabbi raised his voice enough so Tommy could hear him a full half-a-block away. "But people around here, they have what you call a nickname for her. She acts like she was royalty, they say, so they call her--what was it?--Oh, yes--" He raised his voice a little higher. The whole street was listening now. "They call her the princess."

And the rest is history.



NOTICES

LANDSPEEDER - A bimonthly zine devoted to the SW saga; 20 pages, quick printed. Offers news, a column from England, poetry, cartoons, filks, puzzles, short fiction, serialized longer fiction, zine ads, want ads, TESB photos, more. Several issues in print, SASE for information on current and back issues. Lisa Adolf, 2115 Rocky Point Road, #26B, Bremerton, Washington 98312. Contributions always welcome!

JUNDLAND WASTES - For all the news that fits on the SW universe and how your fellow fans see and write it, including reviews, articles, LOCs, zine listings; the only complete source of information for SW zines. JW is bimonthly, 20 pages reduced. Subscriptions $6.00/3 issues. Checks to Pat Nussman, Jundland Wastes, P. O. Box 22362, Baltimore, MD 21203.

ALDERAANI IMPERATIVE - A new zine related to SW which will premier in February, 1983. Fiction by Adolf, Taero, Brin, Laymon and Goldstein, more. Sent $5.00 deposit and SASE to reserve to Pat Nussman, P. O. Box 22362, Baltimore, MD 21203.

ON THE MARK - A newsletter for Mark Hamill and Luke Skywalker fans. Published quarterly, $1.00/issue, $4.00/year. Issue #1 now available. Contributions of articles by fans who have met Mark, plus filks, cartoons, poetry, SHORT fiction being accepted for future issues. Make checks payable to: Lisa Cowan, P. O. Box 5276, Orange, CA 92667.

DOCKING BAY 4 - Special Issue! Last chance to read speculations on ROTJ before all our ideas get squashed by The Real Truth that we'll learn on May 25! Fiction by Benedict, Berger, Kreuz, Rhiemmenth, Nussman, Paulson, Crist; art by Lybarger, Varesano, Low, Faraci, Drake, Zan, more. Must come out in April, 1983. Reserve copy for $5.00 and SASE, order from Cyndi Hartman, 5114 Highcrest Road, Rockford, IL 61107. DOCKING BAY 3 now available. $8.50 plus $2.00 first class, or $1.50 UPS.

LEGENDS OF LIGHT - New SW zine now available. Fiction by Walker, Voll, Hernandez. Art by Dunster, Lybarger, Drake, Low, McPherson, others. Lots of variety! 333 pages, offset. $8.50 in person. $3.00 and SASE for postage to reserve to: Susan Voll, 507 Carthage Drive, Xenia, Ohio 45385. Checks payable to Susan Voll. Issue #2 due out Fall, 1983, $5.00 to reserve; ad exchange welcomed.

THE OLD REPUBLIC READER - The new quarterly SW zine due out in December, 1982. Contents include the Other Hope Survey results, Leia biography, TESB parody, E.T. album review, filk--you name it. 20 pages offset. $1.75/issue. Yearly subscription $6.00. Write to Gundark Press, c/o Suzy Sansom, 115 Lawnview Circle, Danville, CA 94526. Checks payable to Suzy.

KESSEL RUN 3 - Fanzine containing material dealing with the SW universe. Includes stories, poetry and artwork by Nussman, Zeek, Laymon, Hines-Stroede, Stevenson, Benedict, Jeffords, Fetter, Knights, D'Orazio, Lybarger, Faraci, Drake, Dunster, Low, Hawks, Edwards, Ludwig, Ikeguchi, and more. To reserve copy, send $5.00 and SASE to: Michelle Malkin, 6649 Castor Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19149.

CITYSPEAK - A Blade Runner fan network. A new zine on the horizon. Will have trial run of 4 initial issues. If it's a success, it will continue. Will be published every 6 weeks (hopefully) and will run up to 15 pages per issue. $1.50 per issue or, to show your faith, you can send $6.00 for all 4. The price includes first class postage. Send check or money order to: CITYSPEAK, 622 North Henry, Madison, Wisconsin 53703.

BAD KARMA AND OTHER FALLACIES: THE MOST OF KESSEL RUNDOWN - Texas Karma Publications' Weird World of SWars goes full size and destroys Tokyo. Scheduled features include the best, worst, funniest, and most scatological bits from two years of C-3PO, Sigmund Droid, Drona Blaritt's Empire and Letters to the Editors; more from Princess Leia's Diary; the complete text of Mauzy's Cineus serial; more fiction and stuff from our regular cast of scum and villainy; plus KRD's Idioticon and the Revised Expanded MGTIEG. New material will be featured; contributions gladly accepted. About 250-300 pages, computer typed, reduced. Scheduled for WorldCon '83. SASE: K. Shepherd Tibbetts, 5861 Keeneland Parkway, Dallas, TX 75211.

OFFICIAL STAR WARS FAN CLUB, P. O. Box 2202, Dept. F, San Rafael, CA 94912. Annual membership fee $5.00 (Canadian orders, $6.00; foreign orders, $7.00 - U. S. funds only). Allow 4-6 weeks for delivery of membership kit.

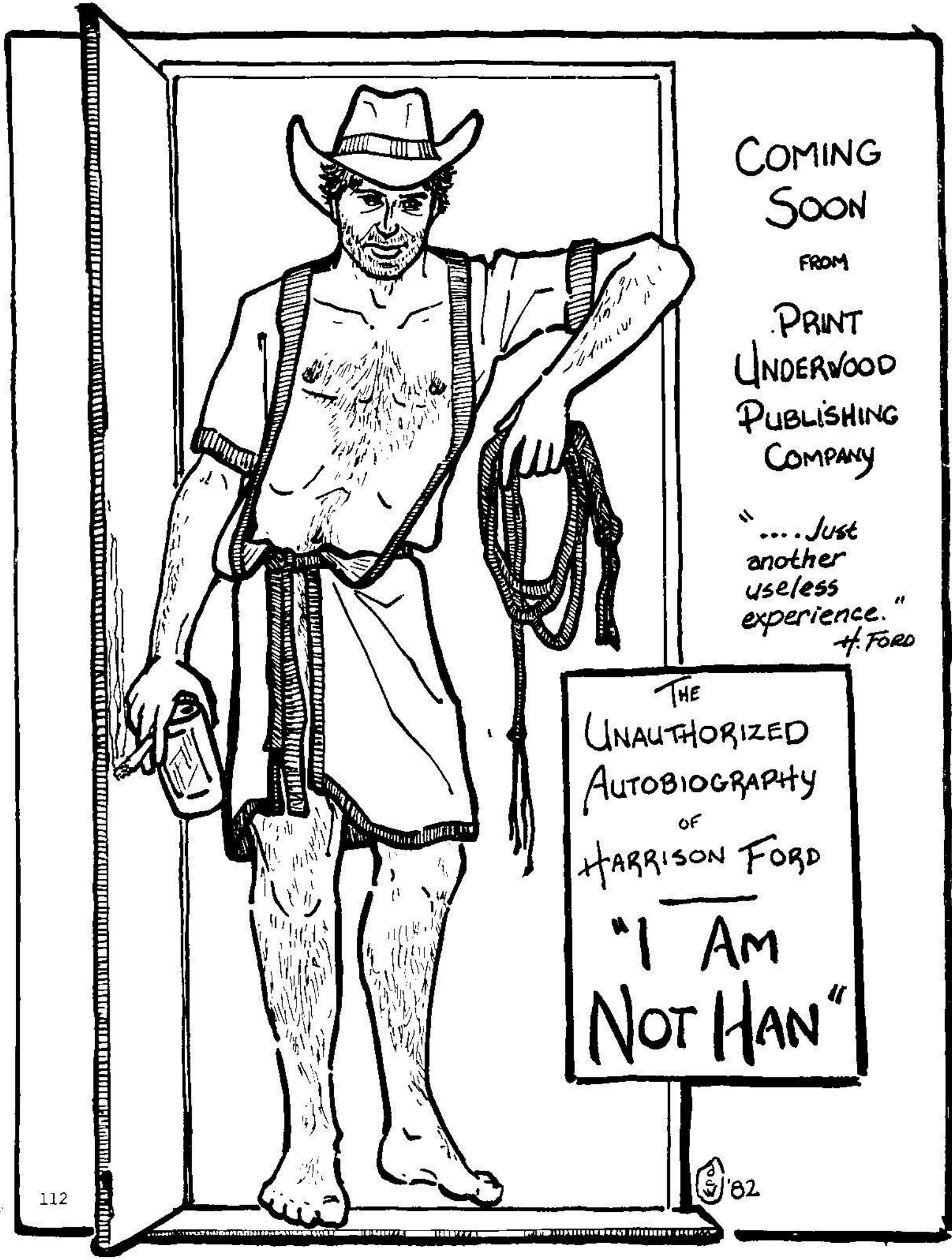
VHF - The Harrison Ford Song Cycle. Also Communion, music inspired by Blade Runner, and Candle in the Shadows, the Corellian celebrated in song. All available on cassette from: Martie Benedict, Box 89, Eckert, Colorado 81418-0089. SASE for information on orders.

FOR SALE: Darling, personal photographs of HARRISON FORD at the Raiders of the Lost Ark seminar in Hollywood. Color, 3½" x 5" photos, 2 sets of 8, $9.00 each postpaid OR get both sets for discount of $17.50 and receive free bonus photo! Check payable to W. Ikeguchi, 2314 Fashion Avenue, Long Beach, CA 90810. Will consider trading if you have an HF collection--send xerox and SASE.

JUST GO

Just go
and leave me standing here
to face a bitter end.
Just go
and take your Falcon
to cruise the stars again.
Just go, please go,
before I lose this wrath
that keeps me in control.
And when you're gone
I'll curse and cry
and call myself a fool
for ever having let you
walk through my door again.
But still I think I always knew
I could never tell you no.
So go, just go
And then in time
Just come this way again.

-KARIN ZYGOWICZ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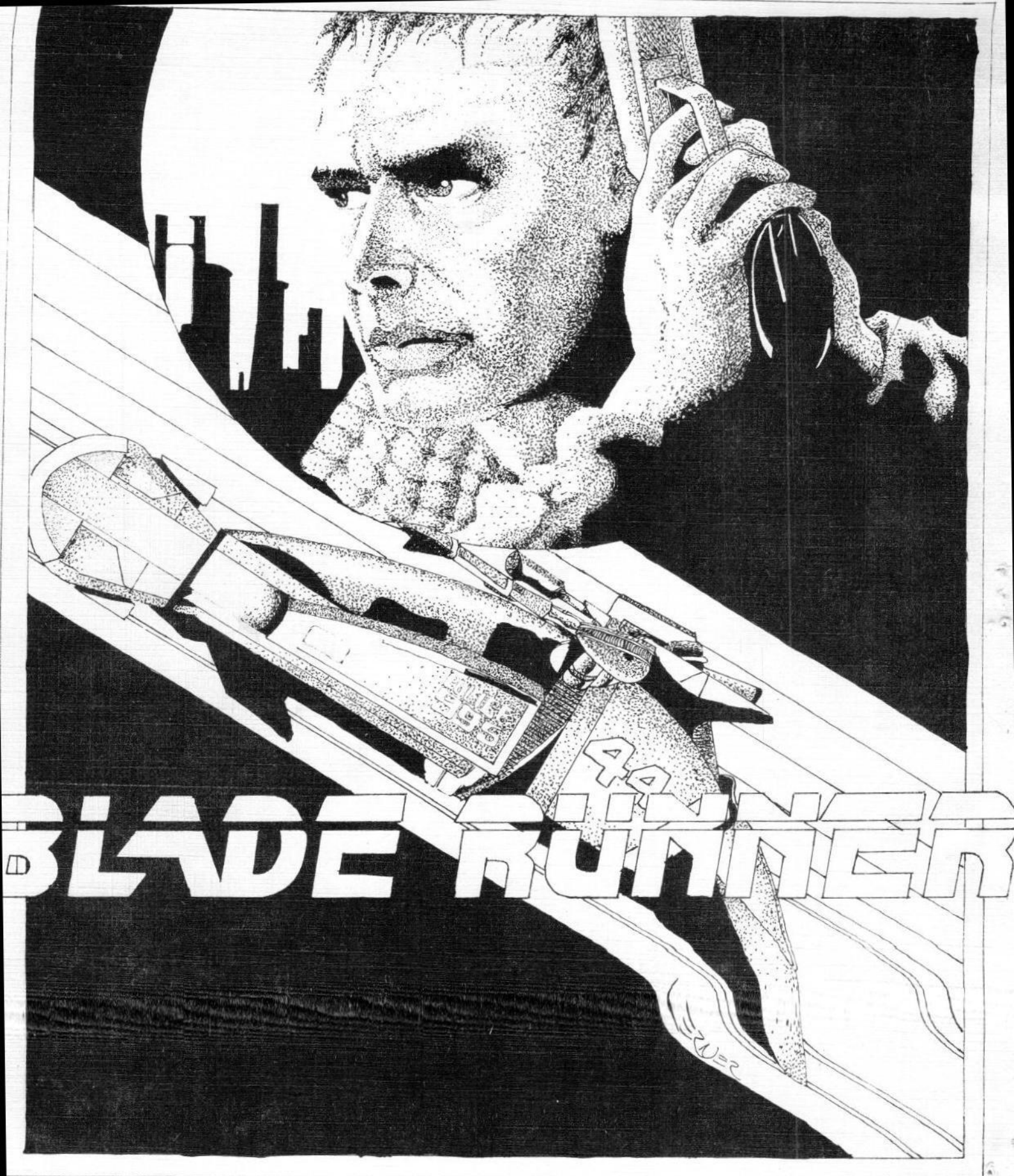
BLADE RUNNER